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JANUARY 2001

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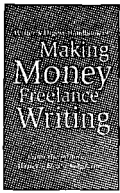
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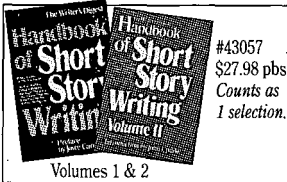
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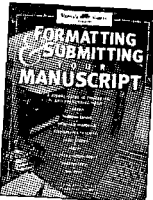
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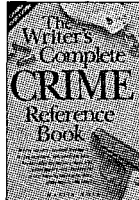
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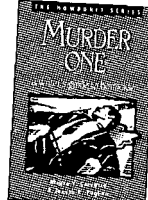
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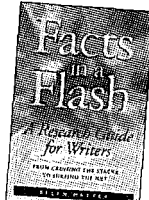
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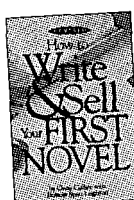
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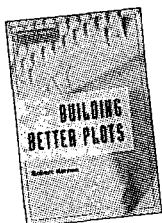
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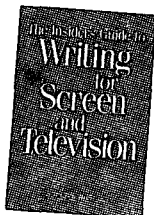
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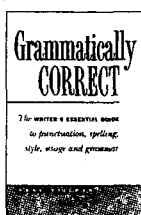
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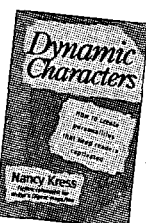
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FICTION

# DECEMBER DEATHWATCH

Gene KoKayKo and  
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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01

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**D**ecember descended on Cambria like a load of tinsel on a too small tree. Every surface seemed coated with some icon of the season. Outside, trees glistened. Inside, trees glowed. Christmas fairly dripped from the landscape. And there was a mood, too; a relaxed, friendly set to the features of the usually gruff grocer and the citizens who walked the streets. Even the tourists were smiling.

In comparison, Rube's old stucco house seemed barren—undraped and unfettered with Christmas cheer. He had the tree up, but it still stood bare. There was a box full of tinsel and lights and ornaments. All he had to do was put them on.

But first things first, and Buddy was first.

The Labrador thumped his tail in anticipation as Rube opened the Kibble Crunchies. The bag had a dog bone all wrapped in bright Christmas paper on it, and Buddy was grinning at Rube, his big tongue lashing the air, when the phone rang.

Rube snatched it from the cradle as though it might bite. "Hello?" There was laughter in his voice over Buddy's antics, but the first words shocked him.

"Sheriff Boggert's been shot," a voice said, and Rube gripped the phone, the idiot smile slipping from his face.

"Who is this?"

"His deputy, Dillon. We're at Templeton General."

"Is it bad?"

There was a little hitch in his

voice. "It isn't good." He paused, then said, "He's asking for you, Rubekowski."

Rube could tell it almost killed Dillon to say that; they weren't exactly friends. "I'll be there in less than an hour," he said.

He filled Buddy's bowl almost automatically, then pushed the box of ornaments out of the way when he went to change his clothes. "Boggert's been shot" kept ringing in his ears. Jesus Jehoshaphat, who'd shoot the sheriff? Boggert was well loved in the small town. It was hard to imagine.

Buddy had finished eating, so Rube opened the door and let him out, locking up as Buddy led the way to the old Ford Rube had recently purchased for emergency trips. Mostly Rube walked but occasionally he had to go out of town for something, so he'd invested a couple of thousand in an old four door sedan.

"In you go."

Buddy stood on the back seat, sniffing, then settled down. Rube rolled the back window down a crack so Buddy could stick his nose out and get some air. The dog sat now, almost regally, with his huge head up, sniffing the night air.

Templeton General was thirty-five miles inland over a pretty fair highway that was little used. If Rube were lucky, there wouldn't be fog and he'd make the trip in forty minutes.

Who would shoot Boggert? He wished he'd asked more questions.

The highway was nearly empty, the weather held, and they pulled into Templeton General at eleven

fifteen P.M. The parking lot was half empty.

"Stay, Buddy."

The dog whined.

"I won't be gone long."

They told him at Information that Boggert was in Room 212, and he moved toward it with dread but with a spark of hope, since John wasn't in Intensive Care. Templeton General was small as hospitals went, all on one level. Even so, the corridors wound round and round mazelike, and he had to stop twice to ask directions. Finally he found the room, opposite a nurse's station.

Rube peeked in first.

The near bed was empty, and the curtains were pulled round the one on the far side of the room.

God, he hated hospitals.

He walked the distance like a man on his way to the gallows. A nurse was just leaving, and they almost bumped as she came through the curtains.

"Yes?"

"Sheriff John Boggert?"

She was tall and lean with dark hair and blue eyes and a sharp little chin. "He's unconscious now," she said.

"I'm Barney Rubekowski. Deputy Dillon called and said the sheriff was asking for me."

Her stare was more efficient than cold. "That may be. The deputy is in the cafeteria."

"Can I just look in for a moment?"

She nodded.

He went through the curtains, his stomach full of dread.

Boggert lay amid a tangle of

tubes and machinery, a ghost of the John Boggert he knew and had come to love. His face was the color of paste, an almost perfect match for his sheets, and his mouth was open though he didn't seem to be breathing. They'd inserted a nasogastric tube that was filled with dark fluid. Rube stared hard at his chest, finally seeing it rise.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat, John," he whispered, "Who did this?"

The cafeteria was tiny, as though they'd converted a couple of hospital rooms as an afterthought, and Rube found Dillon slumped in a corner, contemplating a thick egg salad sandwich.

"These eggs taste sour," he said as Rube sat down with a cup of coffee.

Rube added two scoops of sugar to the coffee.

"I hope the mayo ain't bad—get real sick off of bad mayo," Dillon added.

"I looked in on John," Rube said. Dillon munched. "Looks bad, don't he?"

"What happened?"

Now that he looked more closely, he saw that Dillon looked like hell. His eyes were bloodshot, as if he'd been weeping, and there was a tic beneath the left eye.

"We don't know, really. His last radio call said he was checking out the Bottle Shop at the west end of town. Last we heard until someone called it in from the corner pay phone."

"Someone shot him?"

Dillon nodded. "Twice, in the stomach." The words made Rube



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winced. "I was home with Betty and the kids when the phone rang. The hospital called me first, I guess."

"Was John conscious when you got here?"

Dillon stopped eating and looked from his sandwich to Rube. "In god-awful pain—he was gut shot, you know, and right out of surgery when I first saw him. They let me in post op/recovery when I told them it was police business." Dillon sat like that, with his mouth open.

"And . . ."

Dillon shook his head as if warding off the memories. "I've never seen him like that, in pain and all—scared, you know?"

Rube could imagine.

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Call Rube—I need to talk to Rube,' and then he passed out. I called you the first chance I got."

"What did they find at the scene?"

"Don't know. I called the main office in San Luis, but I don't know yet. No one has gotten back to me."

"What did the doctor say?"

Dillon bit his lower lip. "John might not make it."

After that, there didn't seem much to say, so they sat in silence for a time until Rube finished his coffee. "I'm going back to see John," Rube said.

"That nurse won't let you," Dillon replied.

Rube smiled grimly. "I'll charm her. Or bribe her."

Dillon's face was wooden, his eyes and cheeks hollow looking in the harsh fluorescent light. "If . . . if he wakes up . . ."

Rube waited.

Dillon shook his head. "I'll be back in a few hours."

Rube nodded, and Dillon started to leave.

"Dillon?" The deputy turned. "Catch 'em."

Dillon smiled. "I'll try," he said, disappearing down the long hall.

A different nurse caught him going into Boggert's room. "Are you a relative?" she asked. She had that look in her eyes that said he'd better be or he'd be out in the lobby.

"Brother," he said, the lie slipping easily from his lips.

She stared hard. "Only a few minutes at a time. He's very weak, yet." But she left him to visit.

They'd hung new bottles from Boggert's IV pole—clear fluids and whole blood. Rube watched the life-giving liquid move through the tubes. He found John's hand and took it. The hand was limp and cold.

He held on anyway. Somewhere far off a bell rang. Outside the window the wind blew bare branches around, breaking up the night sky winking with bright cold stars.

Boggert moaned, but with the wind and noises in the hall, Rube almost missed it. Then Boggert squeezed Rube's hand.

"Hot damn, have I got a belly-ache," the sheriff said.

"You've had surgery, John. You were shot."

"Really? I do remember the shot part."

"Who did it?"

"Kids."

"Kids?"

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"Two, maybe three, but I only saw one."

His eyes opened then, watery and light blue. They seemed to have trouble focusing.

"Who were they, John?"

Boggert tried to grin, but it didn't come off, instead looked more like a grimace of pain. "Ainsley boy was one of them. Other two were in the shadows."

"Ainsley?"

"His daddy owns a ranch at the edge of town."

"Did you tell Dillon this?"

Boggert shook his head. "I'm telling you, Rube. Find 'em, Rube." The pressure on Rube's hand tightened, and without opening his eyes again Boggert added, "Without telling Dillon."

While Rube was thinking about that, Boggert passed out again.

The nurse ran him out. "Needs his rest, your time's up."

Feeling numb, Rube went back to the lobby, not even thinking about going home. He spent the night curled up in a big chair, every hour or so sneaking quietly down the hall of the west wing to check on Boggert. He went outside after every visit and let Buddy out of the car to run in circles around the parking lot.

"I know how you feel, boy . . ." Not tell Dillon? This was going to be hard enough without . . . I'll give it twenty four hours, Rube thought. See what I can find out. Then I'll tell them the Ainsley boy's name.

Buddy whined before getting back in the car, and Rube felt like doing the same every time he reentered the hospital.

Rube was standing alongside the bed as the sun rose. The tree outside caught the light and looked as if it were blossoming with fire blooms in December.

What was he supposed to do?

"Find 'em," Boggert had said.

Children. But children with guns?

The anger started at the pit of his stomach, much like the fire blooms on the tree. He'd stood like this when his wife had cancer, hating the long days and nights. There'd been little he could do. Finally he'd taken Eleshia home to die. But one can't search out the causes of cancer and wreak vengeance. Here, there was a human cause.

He kept that thought in the forefront as he searched through John's personal effects in the small closet. In their rush they'd just hung up his uniform and gun belt, assuming that Dillon would take the weapon—as he should have. Rube took the gun from its holster and stuck it in the front of his pants. He felt silly, like a gunslinger from a Western movie. It was heavier than he'd expected, and it tugged at his trousers. He buttoned his coat over it and left the hospital.

Buddy was half crazy by the time he reached the car. Rube let him out to dash over to the bushes, then come running back to jump on his person, asking what was wrong. Rube shooed him off and climbed into the car, the big dog following him, leaning over the front seat, drowning him with wet sloppy kisses. Rube hung onto his neck like a small boy with a big problem.

"We're going home now," he told

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the dog, starting the car. "It's going to be all right."

All the way back to the house he felt disoriented, like a feather floating away. But a feather with a hot stone at its center. He kept petting Buddy's head, telling him everything was all right. But even after the dog settled down on the back seat, Rube kept saying it, trying to reassure himself. But the anger in him felt like a madness, and madmen are never all right.

At the house Rube showered and changed, letting Buddy into the back yard to work off his pent-up energy. He tried to eat something, managed some toast and orange juice, and paced the house, still trying to come to grips with the fact his best friend had been shot.

Granted, Boggert was a sheriff and there were risks in the job, and there had been an upswing in the crime rate during the four months that Rube had been in town. But to be shot by children? He had to get information—he'd call Dillon.

The receiver in his hand, Rube hesitated. The deputy had called him last night but at Boggert's request. Would he give him information willingly? The phone was too easy to hang up. Rube grabbed the car keys and headed back out.

Buddy whipped around the side of the house and was at the front gate before him, tail thwumping excitedly.

"No, boy, I'm sorry. You'll have to stay here. You know how Dillon is—he thinks I should keep you on a leash at all times. I'm pretty sure he's the one who called in the com-

plaint to the animal regulations people. If you go, he might not talk. Stay here and decorate the tree for me, will you?"

He tried not to hear the whines as he drove away, and barely got out of the way of a yellow school bus whizzing down the road past the end of his driveway.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat, I thought those things were supposed to go slow!" Rube muttered aloud. He still didn't feel comfortable driving. but Dillon's house was too far to walk to, and he wanted answers fast.

Turning up the long windy road that led to Pine Knolls Estates, a fancy name for a normal housing tract, Rube started looking at street names and numbers. Boggert had told him two months ago where Dillon lived, and Rube had looked up the street address before leaving the house, but he'd never actually been there.

A retired chemist, Rube always thought of it as a chemical reaction: some people reacted well to others, and some didn't. He and Dillon had clashed from the start.

He pulled up alongside the curb and got out, trying to think of something friendly to say. When the door was answered by a thin, pretty woman in her late thirties, he still hadn't thought of anything.

"Mrs. Dillon?" he asked, and when she nodded, he continued. "I'm Barney Rubekowski. Is—" he felt mortified realizing he didn't know Dillon's first name—"your husband home?"

"No," she said, "he left at six to go back to the hospital and to check in

at the San Luis station house for the update. He'll be back by seven thirty. Would you like to come in and wait?"

"Yes, please." She showed him into the living room. There followed a moment of uncomfortable silence. Rube had never been sociable—that had always been Eleshia's department—and faced by this nice, average woman in her home, he didn't know what to say. He wandered over to the fireplace mantel and examined the groups of photographs.

"Nice pictures. Are they of your family?"

"Yes," Mrs. Dillon said, joining him. "This is Maurice and I on our honeymoon, and here's a group shot that was taken last year. These are our children Monica, Sheldon, and John. Maurice insisted we name our last child John, after the sheriff."

Rube didn't know what was more disconcerting, the look she was giving him with this last comment or the knowledge that Dillon's first name was Maurice.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Rubekowski. Maurice doesn't talk much about his work, but I have heard about you, of course. About your involvement with the captain's death and finding out he killed Betty Sturgis, and about Rose Mitchem and Cindy, and getting the Andereses to take Cindy in."

Rube squirmed in his tennis shoes.

"And I know that my husband and you do not get along." She smiled at him gently, looking from him to a picture of Dillon standing proudly in his uniform.

"You have to realize what his job means to him, Mr. Rubekowski. How much he idolizes John Boggett. And meaning no disrespect to you, it's been obvious since you came here that you've struck up a closer friendship with the sheriff than Maurice has been able to achieve in ten years. Since you've been in town, in just a few months, there have been two murder cases, both of which you solved and not Maurice. He feels like you're competing with him for his job and for his relationship with the sheriff." She picked up the framed picture of Dillon. "My husband is a good man, Mr. Rubekowski. A diligent police officer, thorough in his work and dedicated to it. But he's not a brilliant man, or a particularly charismatic one. He will never be sheriff, and it eats at him."

Rube swallowed hard. "Why are you telling me all this?"

She brushed her hand across the picture of her family. "Because all three of my children were at that Halloween party at the Vets' hall, two of them in line for the Bobbing for Apples barrel. If you hadn't been there, my children might have eaten some of those poisoned apples. When I try telling that to Maurice, all he can say is that you had no right to be there and no right to step in and take charge the way you did. But as I see it, if you hadn't, Robert would have died or still be in a coma, and the sheriff's granddaughter might have died. I love my husband, but I can't make him see things the way I do."

Rube didn't know what to say. "I don't want his job—honest. I came



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here to retire, to work in my garden ... I'm lucky that I've made friends with John Boggert—he is a good man, and Buddy just seems to lead me into situations—but I don't want Dillon's job. Tell him that."

To get her off the topic, he picked up the largest picture, a group shot of well over thirty people.

"Is this all your family? Or some of ... Maurice's, too?"

She smiled and took his point. "Maurice was an only child, and his parents died in a car accident when he was eighteen. My family settled here over a hundred years ago and are all over the place. This picture was taken on the Fourth of July last year. These are my sisters, and my brother Ralph. Maurice loves playing with the kids—he's a wonderful uncle in addition to being a wonderful father. My sisters married local boys; their last names are Winslow and Ainsley. This isn't even the full clan. We probably wouldn't all fit in the frame at one time."

Rube's throat tightened. Ainsley. The Ainsley boy.

"What are the children's names?"

"My sister isn't very creative—she went alphabetically. Her three boys are Adam, Boyd, and Clark. The little girl is Delina."

She went on telling Rube all the other names, but he didn't hear her; he was focusing on the middle child, Boyd, who was thirteen or fourteen, Rube was no expert on teenagers. The older boy Adam was seventeen or older, so tall and wide through the shoulders Rube doubted he could be called a kid, and Clark was under ten—Rube re-

fused to believe that a ten-year-old would be wielding a gun.

"Thank you for all your time, Mrs. Dillon. Please tell your husband that I was here, and that I'll call soon to see if he can give me the update on John's, um, Sheriff Boggert's condition. I have to go now—I left Buddy with a neighbor, and he'll have a fit if I'm not back soon." He left unsaid whether the one having the fit would be his dog or his neighbor; he just wanted out of the house before Dillon showed up. He shook Mrs. Dillon's hand and made for the door, and retreated to the safety of his car.

As he drove away, his brain felt numb with the emotional burden the woman had laid on him, and he was unsure what to do about it. But he did understand why Boggert had wanted to tell Rube, and not Dillon, the child's identity.

Boggert's hospital room was empty when Rube entered it.

His heart and stomach collided in that split second of horror. He grabbed the first nurse he saw.

"Sheriff Boggert—where is he—what happened?"

She knew without consulting any chart. "His temperature went up and they're worried about infection so they've moved him to Intensive Care. He's officially comatose."

Rube wasn't sure exactly what he told the staff in Intensive Care, but they let him in after listing "rules" he barely heard. Though it might have been the lighting, or just the implications of Intensive Care, John seemed to Rube to look

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much worse. Rube sat with him for twenty minutes, telling him about his and Buddy's attempt to decorate their still bare Christmas tree. Even the nurse's looking in didn't stop him. Finally, standing up to leave, he told the unconscious sheriff, "John, you know how I hate hospitals; I told you that in October when you were in for your heart attack. If you don't wake up soon on your own, I'm going to bring Buddy in here to lick you awake. You don't want that, so wake up, Sheriff Boggert."

From there he drove to San Luis Obispo, to the main police station. After asking at the front desk for the officer in charge of the Boggert case, he spoke to a Lieutenant Shaffer, who seemed to know who Rube was without explanation. After the anonymity of New York, Rube found this small town habit of knowing everyone and their business unnerving.

"Deputy Dillon told us you'd probably be checking in and that Sheriff Boggert had asked for you before he lapsed into the coma, so we don't have a problem sharing what we know—it's damn little. Sheriff Boggert's last report on the radio came in at eight P.M. He said he was checking out a possible disturbance at the Bottle Shop. At eight twenty a couple out walking their dog used a corner pay phone to report someone shot and bleeding all over the sidewalk. John was taken to Templeton General and was in surgery for almost two hours. He was briefly conscious and asked his deputy to contact you, and that's all we know. One of the

nurses reported that during one of your visits Boggert was conscious and spoke to you. He say anything?"

Damned eavesdropping nurses, Rube thought.

"Yes, he said his belly hurt like hell, and that it was a couple of kids who shot him. Two or three—he couldn't see clearly since they were in shadows."

"Kids, huh. Any names?"

"No," Rube said, thinking that another six months in this county and he'd be an accomplished enough liar to run for public office. "No names." Not for twenty-four hours. Please God, let Boggert have twenty-four hours.

"Well then," the lieutenant said, already dismissing him, "we'll let you know if we find out anything ourselves. Anything else?"

"No," Rube said, "thank you for that."

Back in town, he parked his car in his driveway and let Buddy out for a walk all the way to the beach, the sand occupied only by driftwood, seaweed, and seagulls constantly landing and taking off. Rube stuffed his hands in his pockets, perched on a piece of driftwood the length of a city bus, and watched as Buddy romped down the beach, racing back through the surf to come whoofing up to Rube, spraying him with saltwater and wet sand.

"Get out of here," Rube said, throwing a stick for the Lab to chase. "You'd think you were a puppy instead of an elderly gentleman dog. Where's your dignity?"

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Buddy showed him exactly where his dignity was as, on his next pass, he lifted his leg and marked both ends of the driftwood.

A suicidal gull swooped down as if to take a tuft of hair from the Lab's tail, and the chase was on. Left alone for a time, Rube tried to plot his next course of action. He didn't have a computer or know how to use one. He was new in town and was acquainted with only a few people. What would Boggert do in a case like this? Talk to people. Exactly what Rube hated to do.

Eva Surbol wasn't sure whether to smile or frown when Rube entered her office at the Youth Center. Her eyes automatically looked behind him.

"I left Buddy outside with some kids. They promised to keep an eye on him." Rube felt ridiculously uncomfortable. He'd met Eva Surbol at the Halloween party she'd organized for the town's children. There'd almost been a spark between them, a spark that had fizzled when Rube discovered the link between Eva and Sam Mitchem and how she hadn't sent a party invitation to Cindy Mitchem, the only child in town not invited, just to get back at Cindy's mother, Rose.

That decision had led to a chain of events that included a teenage girl's murder, Rose's complete descent into madness, and Cindy's finally being taken in by the Anders family, a huge, sprawling family whose worst problem was being heard at a dinner table that seated twenty-plus, trying to get someone to pass the butter.

Eva sensed his discomfort, and it seemed to calm her. "Have a seat, Rube. I take it this isn't a social visit?"

"No, Eva. Have you heard yet that Sheriff Boggert was shot?"

From her reaction Rube knew she hadn't heard. News travels fast in a small town, but this small town slept in late and the rumor mills hadn't warmed up yet. It was barely gone nine o'clock—just twelve hours since Boggert had been shot.

"My God! Who did it?" Eva asked.

"I don't know yet. That's why I'm here. You've lived here almost your whole life, you know the people better than I do. Who's capable of something like this?"

She stared at him in shock. "Why do you think it's a towns person? We're not exactly closed off from the outside world. It could have been someone passing through—people do that, you know. Drive through for gas or food or directions to Hearst Castle."

"Stop by, ask for directions, and shoot the sheriff?" Rube continued before she got mad. "Okay, it *could* be an outsider. But I don't know what to do about that. I'll let the police in San Luis check it out. I saw John at the hospital, and he asked me to look into it, here in town."

She sighed. "I don't know. No one in public office can be popular with everyone all the time—but John has been elected twice now in landslide. Even the ones who complain about him like him as a person. I don't see any of the voting populace doing it..."

Eva stopped at the look on Rube's face. "What is it?"

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"That's just it, Eva. I don't think it was the voting populace. Before John slipped into a coma, he told me that it was a kid who shot him. That there were two or three, he wasn't sure, but it was definitely a kid. And working here at the Youth Center, you know the kids."

Her voice became glacial. "So you want me to inform on the children, hand you a list of suspects like I handed you the list of children invited to the Halloween party—"

"No," Rube cut her off, as angry as she was. "I want you to tell me about the children of this town—which ones have gone bad, and which ones may have fallen in with the wrong crowd. I don't want you to accuse children, I want you to help me find the 'child' who held a gun and shot our sheriff point-blank, twice in the gut, and left him lying there bleeding on the sidewalk for strangers to find."

They were sitting there glaring at each other, each refusing to budge, when her office door opened and Buddy lunged in, followed closely by four small children.

"Woof," Buddy said, rubbing against Rube trying to express his disgust and to dislodge the plastic bowl the children had attached to his back. The red and green ribbons tied on the dog's tail, legs, and around his neck, Rube understood, but a plastic bowl?

A little girl of perhaps six, swathed in a tablecloth, came alongside to explain things.

"We were trying to make him look like a camel. I'm one of the three magicians who come to look at the Christ baby, and I'm sup-

posed to ride a camel. Buddy is just the right color and size, but he doesn't like his hump."

"No, I suppose he doesn't," Rube said, trying to keep his face straight while unknottting the string that held the bowl in place. As soon as he was humpless, Buddy retreated behind Eva's desk and lay down, worrying at the ribbons on his tail. Eva shoed the children away, saying she'd be out in a minute to start a game going.

When they were alone again, she faced Rube. "Do you want an entire rundown, or do you have certain people in mind? And why isn't Dillon doing this?"

Rube decided to tell the truth. "Because John did see one of the kids and told me his name. The Ainsley boy, is what he said. I've done some asking around since then and came up with Boyd."

She sighed. "Boyd used to come in here, when he was nine or ten. Now he's too big for us. Most of the pre-teens feel that way nowadays."

"You know who he hangs out with?"

The moments passed while she decided. "Two boys. Jason Lewis and Thad Wilkinson."

"Do they come here?"

"No, never. Their older brother and sisters did, but not those two."

Rube knew what she was telling him without her having to say it. Jason and Thad were bad news. Bad enough for Eva Surbol to give up their names without a fight.

"Thank you. I do appreciate it."

She didn't answer, just looked down at the paperwork on her desk. Rube stood up, and Buddy



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came out from behind her desk to join him, sticking close until they got out the front door, away from the pre-schoolers. Buddy had definitely not liked being a camel.

There was a public pay phone outside the Youth Center. Rube used the telephone book to look up the Ainsleys' address. In the car he used the local map in the glove compartment to find the street, Eucalyptus. He dreaded doing this, but it wouldn't get any better and the sooner done, the sooner over with as Eleshia's mother used to tell her son-in-law. The old woman had died before Eleshia had been diagnosed with cancer. That had been one blessing.

But now Rube had to face a different mother and tell her that her son had been involved in a shooting. Rube had also called the hospital—there had been no change.

He drove slowly until he found Eucalyptus. He parked across the street and left Buddy behind in the car. Since it was a weekday, he might find only the wife at home if she didn't work. Since she was related to Dillon's wife, he hoped she'd be as civic-minded; maybe they'd both be willing to take the boy in for the San Luis police to talk to regarding his choice of friends. Boggert had said Boyd hadn't been the one to shoot him. He'd get off lightly. Lord, he wanted this over with!

The house was a two story modern Spanish home, with white stucco archways and a red tile roof. More lawn than flowers. The garage door was open; there were two cars inside and several bicycles. Maybe Boyd's father was at home

—or they had more than two cars. No toys on the lawn. He was stalling.

At the front door he rang the bell and heard voices from inside. A woman who bore a close resemblance to Betty Dillon answered the door, looking at him with polite curiosity.

"Mrs. Ainsley?"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes flicking towards his hands to see if he carried any sales brochures or samples.

"My name is Barney Rubekowski. I work sometimes with Sheriff Boggert . . . and Deputy Dillon." It was a stretch but not an outright lie. "Have you heard about Sheriff Boggert yet?"

Shadows crossed her eyes, and Rube noticed the circles under them.

"Yes, we've heard. Betty called me last night." Silence.

"May I come in, Mrs. Ainsley?"

She hesitated, and the first shred of worry tickled the back of Rube's throat. Then she stepped backwards and gestured him inside. Before turning to the left to enter the living room, he caught a glimpse down the right-hand hallway of an open door that led to the den. He had a clear view into it before his hostess tugged on his sleeve.

The living room was brightly decorated and had even more family photographs on the walls than the Dillons'. "Have a seat, Mr. Rubekowski. I'll get my husband. The boys are in school."

Sitting on the edge of the couch, Rube watched her disappear down the hallway to the den. To his im-

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mediate left was the dining room, and past that the kitchen. Center was the staircase. He heard voices, then footsteps coming back towards him. Mr. Ainsley led the way. Rube had a feeling that if the husband had answered the door, Rube wouldn't have been allowed inside the house.

He was a good-sized man with broad shoulders that had more muscle than flab and a tan that looked like weekend golf, not ranching. The hand he gave to Rube to shake had no calluses, but the gray eyes certainly did. The whisper started getting louder in the back of Rube's brain.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Rubekowski? My sister-in-law gave us an update this morning, that John was still in a coma. We're not exactly next of kin—why are you here?"

The whisper in Rube's brain made Rube so angry he was more direct than he'd meant to be.

"When Sheriff Boggert came out of surgery last night," he said, "he asked Dillon to notify me. I went to the hospital and spoke to the sheriff before he lapsed into the coma. He told me who shot him."

"How very interesting. But I repeat, why are you here?"

Rube stared at the man, then looked over his shoulder at the wife who could no longer meet his eyes. They knew. Somehow they knew.

"Sheriff Boggert told me there were three boys. He named your son, Boyd."

Mrs. Ainsley made a mewling sound and turned away, hunching in on herself. Without taking his

eyes off Rube, her husband said, "Go into the kitchen, Leslie, I'll take care of this." She fled, only the sound of her weeping remaining behind. The man's eyes never wavered, only went from the gray of stormclouds to granite.

"I don't believe you, Mr. Rubekowski. My brother-in-law, Deputy Dillon, was never given such a statement, and until Sheriff Boggert regains consciousness, Dillon is the local law, not you. You were deputized by the sheriff in October in special circumstances. Those are over, and the sheriff is in a coma from which I hear it's likely he'll never recover. I think your deputy days are over."

Rube stared at him, still not believing. "Did Boyd tell you when he came home last night? Or did you find him with blood on his hands? He and his friends shot the sheriff twice in the stomach and left him there on the sidewalk to die. I know he didn't pull the trigger himself, but I saw that you do have a gun cabinet in your den. Was it one of your guns that shot the sheriff? If Boyd comes forward now and talks, the courts will go easier on him and his companions."

Not even an uneasy blink. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Rubekowski. My son was home all last night with his brothers, his mother, and me. I'll testify in court to that. My family has been in this county for sixty years; my wife's for a hundred. You've been here for what—four months now? It's only your word that Boggert said anything about Boyd. The official record is that he

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was unconscious and spoke to no one. He won't come out of it, the doctors say. It will be your word against ours. Who do you think the authorities will believe? Longtime residents who've helped this county grow and prosper, or some busybody who moved here months ago and has done nothing but cause trouble since? Enough is enough—I want you out of my house.”

Rube thought of a million things to say but, looking at Ainsley's face, knew that nothing would move him. But his anger wouldn't let him stay silent.

“So just like that, you cover up for your son and his two friends who might very well be responsible for a murder. Because of your ‘good’ name you'll say nothing and leave the children free to think they can get away with murder, now and anytime they feel like it.” He walked to the door. Before it was slammed in his face, he looked back. “I hope you sleep well tonight, Mr. Ainsley. I hope your son has sweet dreams.”

The door almost splintered it slammed so hard. The blood pounded in Rube's ears as he went to his car. Buddy whined when he got in as if the dog could read his mood. He lay down on the back seat, almost covering from Rube's rage.

He hardly remembered the drive home, only that he was honked at more than usual—his fury made him swerve more than a time or two, and he clenched the steering wheel so hard it left red marks on his palms. He dropped Buddy off at home and then drove to the hospital, spending time with the co-

matose Boggert, staring at the tubes that carried fluids in and out, keeping the sheriff alive. Rube hoped some idea would come to him while he sat there.

At home he made phone calls. They were informative but not productive. He had no proof—all he had was hearsay from a comatose man which no one else had heard. He'd told the San Luis police, Lieutenant Shafer, that Boggert had spoken, that he'd said two or three kids but that no names had been mentioned. Now he had a name. Did that mean he was lying the first time?

That night before he went to bed he took out Boggert's gun and looked at it. The thing felt ugly and awkward in his hand. But he knew the fascination guns had for people, especially Americans and specifically American males. To him it was ugly. He put the gun away and went to bed. Even his dreams were ugly.

The next morning another round of calls. Nothing had changed except his rage. He had to do something; someone had to do something.

Boggert was still in the hospital, still comatose; Dillon was the uncle of Rube's main suspect and wouldn't act against family. Who else was there? Him. Rube. Even if he were still deputized, he had no idea what to do, what he could do within the law. He wasn't a cop—he was just an old man who'd come here to retire and had acquired a dog . . .

Where was Buddy?

The Lab was by the front door

with his head on his paws, staring at the door as if concentrating would open it.

Rube smiled and reached for his jacket.

"Well, Buddy, I may not be able to get Boyd Ainsley to own up to being part of Boggert's shooting, but I can still take you for a walk. That's part of a dog owner's responsibility . . ."

His words dwindled away as he stared at the powerhouse movement of Buddy's tail at the word "walk," and it was as if the tail swept away some mental cobwebs.

"Buddy, I'm still sorry about leaving you in the car overnight at the hospital. I'm going to make it up to you by taking you on some extra long walks in the next few days. Starting now. After a few phone calls."

Rube and Buddy passed the junior high school just as school let out, Rube timing his turn-around perfectly so, as they made their way back, many of the children called out to Buddy, who wagged his tail in return and took pats from everyone, his huge head sniffing out any food offerings. Rube said hi to the kids, keeping his eyes on Boyd, who was soon aware of them, his body stiffening, his head swiveling around to see if a police car were nearby. Rube noticed the two boys with Boyd; all three were whispering and looking Rube's way before turning their backs and starting to walk home.

"Come on, Buddy, time to go home ourselves." He guided the Lab through dozens of children, several of the kids walking with

them, so when Boyd and his friends turned back to look, they couldn't say Rube was following them.

They paraded down the main road for about six blocks before Boyd turned right, headed for his own neighborhood.

"Anybody live on Eucalyptus Street?" Rube asked.

"I do," one boy said, his glasses glinting in the late afternoon sun.

"How'd you like an escort home?" Rube asked him.

"Cool," the boy said. As they continued onward, more children peeled off on their own routes. Boyd kept looking behind him to see if Rube and Buddy were still with him. The bespectacled boy lived six doors down on the opposite side of the street from Boyd, and Rube lingered to see Boyd go inside and dart to the living room window to peer back out at him.

The next morning Rube was three blocks away from the school eating a bagel when Boyd passed him. Rube and Buddy fell into place behind him and strolled along the path, continuing on their way when Boyd turned into the school grounds. At lunchtime Rube and Buddy were at the far side of the playground, Rube eating a sandwich and Buddy romping with the children. Rube just stared in Boyd's direction for the fifteen minutes the boy stayed outside. For some reason he left the playground early, went inside, and didn't come back out.

During fifth period, when Rube had an appointment with the school principal, they walked around the grounds in full view of



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the school, Rube ostensibly talking about volunteering his and Buddy's time to help with the kids but also making sure they walked past Boyd's English class a few times.

During after-school football practice Buddy and Rube were loafing around on the playing field, watching Boyd fumble the ball more and more. Since he'd halfway been waiting for it, Rube wasn't surprised when he saw a patrol car in the distance making its way towards them.

"Buddy, come here," Rube said, and for once the Lab rose and came to his side. Rube reached into a pocket and pulled out the leash he'd bought three months ago but had seldom used. He snapped it onto Buddy's collar and patted the dog's head when he protested. "It's for a good cause."

Rube was studying the clouds when Deputy Dillon left the patrol car and walked up to them.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Rubekowski?"

Dillon looked even worse than the last time Rube had seen him. He was still having to deal with Boggert's being shot and lying comatose in the hospital, and he obviously had heard from his sister-in-law about Rube's visit and the accusation against Boyd.

"Admiring the sky," Rube said, watching as the facial tic started on Dillon's face.

"Why are you *here*?" Dillon snapped at him. "You're harassing my nephew, and you're going to stop it now."

Rube turned an innocent face to the deputy.

"Harassing? Your nephew? Does your nephew go to school here? How nice. We're not here to bother anyone, deputy. In fact, I'm just following your friendly advice."

Dillon's face was turning a deep shade of red. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, how many times have you told me it was dangerous to take Buddy on walks along Main Street to the beach, that I should take him for walks off the road; and of course, that I should always have a leash on him. As you see, we're here at the schoolground because it's off the road and Buddy has lots of room to run around and lots of kids to play with. He has his leash on. I don't know what you mean by harassment."

"Stay away from my nephew and his family. Do you hear me, Rubekowski?"

"Of course I hear you, Dillon. You're screaming only six inches away from my face. By the way, have you dropped in on John lately? Any changes?"

For a split second Rube thought the deputy was going to strike him, but he got himself under control and stormed to his car, peeling off in a cloud of gravel and dust. Rube sighed and waited until the patrol car was out of sight.

"Come on, Buddy, time to go home. For now."

After a very light supper Rube drove out to the hospital, leaving Buddy in the car. After a day's worth of freedom, the Lab wasn't happy but settled into the back seat with a minimum of fuss.

Rube sat by Boggert's bedside for

almost two hours, ignoring the fifteen-minute rule. He read the paper aloud in case Boggert could hear him. John's vital signs were stronger and more stable, but he still hadn't twitched an eyelid open.

"Hang in there, John. Buddy and I are doing what we can."

Rube joined the very unhappy Labrador and drove home slowly, thinking about possibilities. Just inside town, Rube went to the local hamburger place and ordered a double deluxe combo with fries. In the car Buddy tried his best to eat his way into the bag, but Rube kept it away from him, eating his fries as he drove to the Ainsleys' house on Eucalyptus. Parking across the street, Rube got out of the car, taking the hamburger bag with him, blocking Buddy from getting out.

"Sorry, Buddy, it hurts me to do this to you, but I need your help on this one." He stepped away from the car, the back window open a few inches, just enough for the Lab's nose to stick out and smell the dripping hamburger as Rube pulled it from the bag. Rube waved it around a few times, then walked away from the car.

Right on cue a horrible wailing rose from the vehicle, a dog's howl that put a new spin on mournfulness. Rube hadn't even counted to three before another dog joined in from next door, and within a few seconds all the dogs in the neighborhood got into the act. Lights started going on up and down the street.

Rube got back into the car and patted Buddy, presenting him with the hamburger, snatching his hand

out of the way just in time, and started the engine, driving slowly down the street but not leaving before he saw the silhouetted outline of Boyd Ainsley peering out of his bedroom window, a not happy boy.

The next day was almost identical except that Dillon was there after school to keep an eye on Rube.

"So, Dillon, what do you know about the two boys with your nephew? The one in the leather looks quite nice, and the other one's tattoos are very artistic. It must make you happy knowing your nephew is hanging out with such goal-minded youngsters. I'd think . . ."

"Stay away from my nephew, Rubekowski. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"I'll stop taking my dog for walks around your nephew's life as soon as you do your job, deputy." Rube's anger matched that of the police officer, and even Buddy felt the tension and rose to his feet, a near-growl coming from his curled lips. Dillon stalked away.

Rube and Buddy continued their walk, but Rube did see Dillon pulling his nephew aside and telling the other boys to go on without him.

It was Friday, and the next week was winter break for the schools. He wouldn't be able to bother Boyd at school, but he had asked the other junior high children where Boyd and his friends hung out. When this was over, he'd have to talk to Eva, or to the liquor store owners directly. He'd been told that the "bad" boys and girls sometimes hung out behind the town's liquor stores after hours to search through the

trash for bottles that hadn't been completely emptied of booze and the same with returned kegs of beer. Now he knew why they'd been at the Bottle Shop but not why they were carrying a gun.

The children somehow knew that he was after Thad and Jason more than Boyd and gave him information they might not have told another adult. Thad and Jason had not made themselves well liked with any of their peers.

After nine o'clock, Buddy on a leash, Rube was walking on the other side of town by the Jug Stop. What a name for a liquor store, Rube thought. He'd gone up and down the street a few times and now crossed the street to go down the alleyway behind the store. There was a streetlight at either end of the block, but the seven stores between them were dark in the back. The liquor store was halfway down. Rube gave Buddy a pat on the head, and they headed down the alley.

The boys were there, Thad inside the dumpster tossing out beer cans and bottles with dribs and drabs still in them, which Jason poured into an empty milk carton. Boyd stood there looking miserable.

Rube was fifteen feet away when they noticed him. Thad climbed out of the dumpster, and the three of them lined up against him. "Good evening, boys. Out a little late, aren't you?" he asked.

"I know who you are, old man," Jason said, sneering at Rube. "All you can do is follow us around and cry to anyone who listens. But no

one will listen to you. So go home, old man, and your stupid dog, too."

Buddy growled and took several steps towards the boys. In the eerie half light of the alley, his shadow looked enormous. Jason reached into his leather jacket and brought out a gun, looking at Rube and smiling the dearest smile Rube had ever seen while he pointed the gun at Buddy.

Rube didn't return the smile, but he did reach under his own coat and bring out Boggert's gun. The smile dropped from Jason's face.

"You don't have the guts to shoot me, old man."

"And you do?" Rube asked quietly.

Jason laughed. "I got all the guts in the world—don't take much to shoot old men. Already shot one, I'll shoot you, too."

"Hold it right there," a voice shouted out, and a high beam flashlight flicked on, the light directly in Jason's eyes. Deputy Dillon stepped out of the back door of the Jug Stop. Jason's hand twitched, and Dillon fired a warning shot into the air. "Drop it, boy, and I mean now."

Jason hesitated, and Dillon stepped forward. "Don't tempt me, boy." He flicked a glance at Rube. "Put yours down, too, Rubekowski. Boyd, get your butt over here—now!"

His nephew fled to his uncle's side, where Dillon put out the hand that wasn't holding a gun and pushed the top of his head until Boyd sat down hard on the asphalt. He looked at Rube.

"I will when he does, deputy."

Dillon's gun swung back at Ja-

son, and the officer stepped farther out into the weak light. Whatever the boy saw in the deputy's face made him put the gun down. Rube put his own gun down softly, away from Buddy's inquisitive nose.

Dillon kicked the guns on the ground away before pulling out a set of handcuffs and putting them on Jason's right wrist and Thad's left wrist. "Sit," he said, using his hand to help them. Backing up, not taking his eyes off the boys, he came alongside Rube to pick up the guns. "Boggert's gun. Wondered where that went to. Just what do you think you were going to do here tonight, Rubekowski?"

"Make a citizen's arrest, deputy. What brings you here?"

The two men's eyes met. "Just doing my job."

"Glad to hear it," Rube said.

The next hour was busy. Dillon called for help, and three other patrol cars joined them, separating Jason and Thad, cuffing them separately. All three boys were taken in. Rube was asked to come to the station house later to make a statement and explain what he was doing there. Dillon had not mentioned Boggert's gun to any of the other police officers.

Finally, they were alone. Rube tried to think of something to say but couldn't. He just went to the chain-link fence that divided the alley from the highway and untied Buddy, preparing to leave. Dillon walked a few steps in the opposite direction before saying, without turning around, "Keep that dog of yours on a leash, Rubekowski."

"Yes, deputy," Rube answered, al-

most smiling. But Dillon didn't offer Rube a ride home.

It was midnight when he arrived at the San Luis station. They were polite but thorough. He found out Dillon had also talked to the junior high school kids—mostly asking them what had Rube been asking them. That was how he'd found out about the liquor stores.

When the police had finished questioning him, he went outside and found Dillon waiting for him.

"Boyd didn't do the shooting," Rube said.

"Yeah, we know. It was the boy named Jason, the one with the leather jacket who pulled the gun on you tonight. But Boyd took the gun out of his father's gun case to impress his new friends. He says he told his parents about it the night it happened, but they stopped him, saying not to talk about it, that they'd take care of it. They'll be talked to at length tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," Rube said, and knew it was no consolation.

"You were right," Dillon said, and Rube winced. "I should have been doing my job and not turning my head from whispers just because it might have involved family. My wife and her sister are not happy with me."

"No, I suppose not," Rube said. "But isn't it better that Boyd learn now the consequences of his actions and learn from them, rather than letting him and the others get away with shooting a man and not owning up to it? If they'd gotten away, what would Jason and Thad have done next?"

Dillon didn't answer. "I have to

go. The doctors called the station house while I was taking Boyd in. It looks like Sheriff Boggert is coming out of it. In a way I'm glad this is over with before he comes to, rather than having the sheriff tell me. Boggert told you it was Boyd, didn't he?"

"Yes" was all Rube could say, and Dillon turned his back and got in to the car and left.

"Merry Christmas, John," Rube said a few days later as he placed the ten inch high decorated tree on Boggert's nightstand and plunked a garishly wrapped package on the bed's meal tray.

"What the heck is that?" Boggert asked, poking suspiciously at the gift.

"A six-pack of assorted puddings," Rube answered, sitting down in the guest chair.

"I thought you didn't celebrate Christmas," Boggert said. "Too religious for you."

Rube straightened one of the lit-

tle tree's branches and looked at his friend. "I decided, for me at least, that it's a good time to honor someone who took on responsibility. For himself and for others. Not much of that going around. So I'll celebrate that. Sara Jane helped me decorate the tree. What do you think?"

Boggert was still eyeing the tree, trying to choose his words, when a commotion broke out in the hallway and the door to Boggert's room burst open, the head nurse there glaring at them with a firm hand on Buddy's collar.

"Sir, is this your dog? Not only do we not allow animals in the hospital, but—this—beast got into the evening food trays so that many patients will have to wait for their dinners. Does this dog belong to you?"

Rube sighed and closed his eyes, hearing Boggert's chuckle even over Buddy's whining.

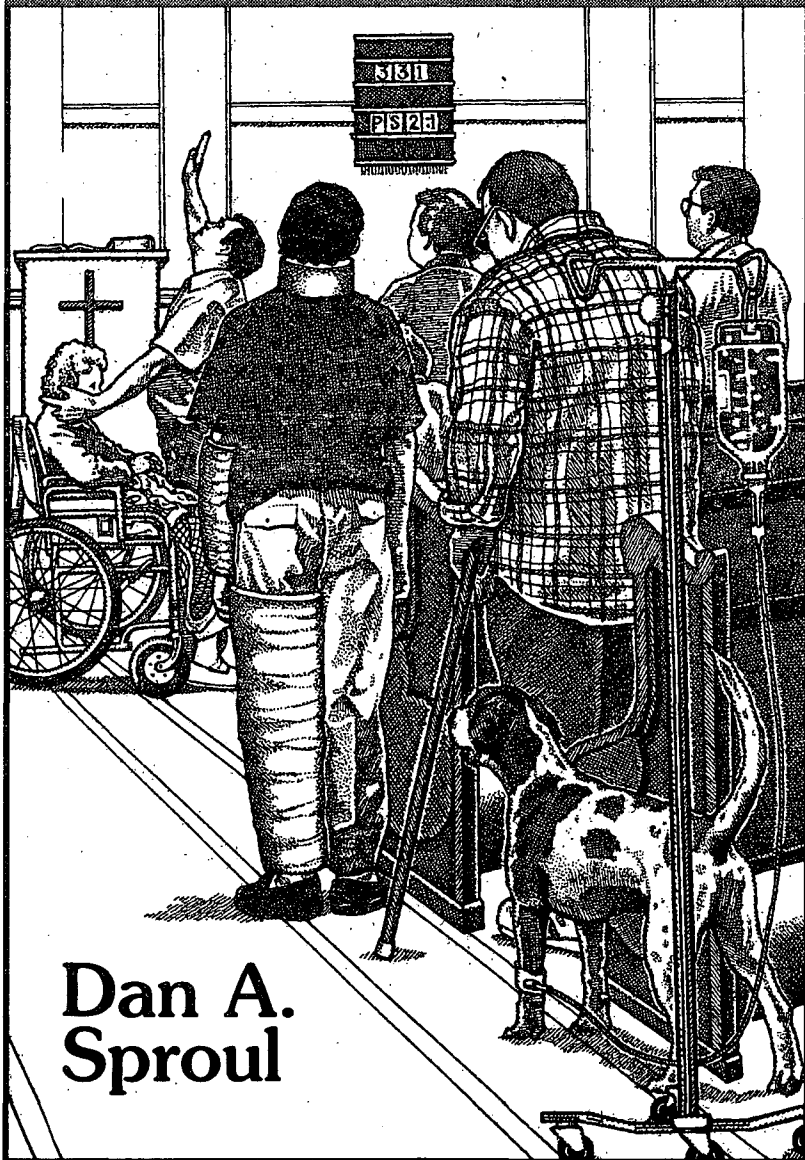
"Happy Responsibility, Rube."

"Bah, Humbug," Rube said.

*NOTE: We are sad to say that Gene KoKayKo died in July 1999, of congestive heart failure, at the age of fifty-seven. He and his fiancée Sherrie Brown also co-wrote an earlier story for us in 1997, "November Nights: Once Upon a Darkling." Before that, Mr. KoKayKo had published two additional stories in AHMM; all four are about Rube and Buddy. For the past twenty years Mr. KoKayKo had been a short story writer, with more than forty stories published in various periodicals.—Ed.*

FICTION

# MIRACLES



Dan A.  
Sproul

*Illustration by Ron Chironna*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01*

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**S**omebody once said that everything in life is a gamble. It's true. Nothing worthwhile in life happens without gambling, which is no more than making a choice and taking a risk. Suppose you start a business, or get married, make an investment, or lend money to a relative, or even vote—every important thing in life requires choice and risk.

Since gambling is a fact of everyday life, it has always amazed me that there are moral do-gooders in the world who disparage gamblers in general and horseplayers in particular. Horseplayers are commonly classed as sick, penniless morons squandering the rent and grocery money on loser after loser. Therefore, it goes without saying, the horseplayer, miserable wretch that he is, must send his kids to school hungry and deprive his longsuffering wife of even basic necessities.

That's not exactly the way of it. Horseplayers are like any other group—successful and unsuccessful. Most fall somewhere in between. Only a few fit the sick, penniless moron stereotype, and I know practically all of them.

I'm Joe Standard. I play the horses. I enjoy playing the horses. I won't quit any time soon. The losing days are necessary; they allow you to really appreciate the good days if any happen to come along. Like the saying goes, a bad day at the track is better than a good day anywhere else. I only bring it up because you can learn a lot from watching a horserace.

In the horseracing world, thoroughbreds compete against others

in their own class. For a racehorse to move up in class is a tough proposition. More often he moves down in class in search of a softer bunch of combatants. Horses who race comprise many different classes and varieties, sort of like life with its complex diversity and classes of people. There's the cheap speedball who sets wicked fractions only to fold up in the middle of the race, finishing way back. And the slow starter who lies back in the pack, nursing his energy to close with a rush in the stretch. There's the plodder who runs the same speed no matter what. If valid contenders have bad luck or expend their energy unwisely, he picks up all the marbles. The potentate of the track is the true speed horse. This fellow takes the lead and plays catch me if you can. If he's fast enough and strong enough, he hits the wire first. But by far the most interesting running style is the stalker or presser. He takes a position just behind the leaders. His game is to press constantly, looking for any hint of weakness, any opening to gain the advantage so he can prevail in the end.

Mordecai Shum, like that kind of horse, was a presser, a cheap presser who ran with the lowest class. His acquaintances gave him the street name Buster. Once upon a time Mordecai slid down the wrong side of the rail at Hialeah at the end of the third race. He was reported to have involved himself in an unsuccessful attempt to throttle a six-year-old gelding by the name of Mr. Buster, who promptly bit him on the face and neck.

Buster Shum was a horseplayer who neatly fell into the degenerate horseplayer stereotype. He rarely worked. His kids didn't know him, and his second wife had long since departed with all she could carry.

Buster frequently screamed epithets at jockeys in the paddock and chronically attempted to borrow from strangers. Such antics are clear indications of an extremely unsuccessful player. He was abrasive, obnoxious, and stupid. I can tell you there are no successful horseplayers who display *all* these character traits: obnoxious and abrasive surely, but not stupid.

Along with his many other shortcomings Buster was a hypocrite of no mean ability. Rarely did he have a bankroll that would support living accommodations. Slow starters and nonwinners gobbled up those funds. He took up more or less permanent residence at the Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church. There he got the pick of the rummage sale clothing and a small room in the parsonage to bunk in. In return he served as a sort of deacon, passing out hymn books and cleaning the bathrooms. He professed to be a true believer, and as if he were receiving a commission from on high, he solicited any and all to come to the church to hear the true word of God. I say he was a hypocrite because his actions were contrary to every godly thing he espoused. He lied, drank, swore, gambled, and philandered with a fervent passion. And I wouldn't have given a damn about Buster one way or the other if it hadn't been for the miracles.

The first miracle didn't get much attention except in the church newsletter. Orville Hanipur, a stutterer from childhood, attended the Wednesday afternoon service at the Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church. As he approached the door at the end of the service, he spoke to the minister standing there, and lo and behold, he didn't stutter. He claimed that after the service he was no longer cursed with stuttering. It was, in his words, a miracle.

Probably I should start at the beginning. As I told you, my name is Joe Standard. I run a one-man detective agency out of a one-room office in the back of Sunbelt Realty in downtown Miami. Not much of an office really, just a desk with a two-drawer filing cabinet on top, a client chair, and a cot beneath my cherished photograph of the matchless Seattle Slew thundering into the far turn at Pimlico in his triumphant victory in the Preakness Stakes.

I had put some money away over the years from the ponies and from some of my more lucrative cases, so I was able to keep an apartment a few blocks over. But the apartment was for entertaining guests. I spent most nights on the cot. It was part of the deal I had with Sunbelt Realty to keep the rent down. The office was in a bad section of Miami. My presence at night in the building allowed them added security. If you have to put a name on it, try night watchman.

While stuttering Orville may have been the first to be cured at the Wednesday afternoon service, he was only the first of many. Still,

to me, it was just a curiosity in the newspapers until an old acquaintance, Chatsworth Roland McDermott, appeared in my office doorway. I learned from his business card that he was now C. R. McDermott, Esquire, a junior member of the esteemed law firm of Moil, Bladderhank, Robski and Finn. He brought with him a most curious dilemma.

It seemed that down the block on Eighteenth Street, two hundred yards from the Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church, was St. Ignatius Catholic Cathedral, one of the largest ecclesiastical buildings in Miami. The publicized accounts and rumors of miraculous happenings at the Wednesday afternoon service of the Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church was decimating attendance at St. Ignatius.

"The bishop contacted our firm," McDermott explained. "We are on retainer with the church. Eh . . . actually, Bladderhank dumped it in my lap. It was decided that these miracles should be looked into. Since you and I worked together before, naturally I came to you."

McDermott was a Harvard graduate with a law degree and a doctorate in philosophy. In college he had longed to become a private detective. Sometime back, McDermott worked with me in the agency for a week or so before deciding that the work was rarely exciting, never lucrative, sometimes life-threatening, and failed utterly to permit mingling with a better class of people. He was a very smart cookie, and one other thing—he had a photographic memory. He

could conjure up anything he had ever read. This was a rare talent and one I envied. Just think, what if you could remember every horse in every past-performance record in every *Racing Form* you'd ever read? You could own the world. McDermott, however, was no horseplayer.

McDermott droned on: "... last Wednesday. You might have read about it. This dog was supposed to have been hit by a car outside the church. It was near death. They gave it some water out of the baptismal basin, and it sprang back to life. Everybody with a hangnail or a pimple on their ass is crowding in there on Wednesday afternoons. We want you to investi—"

"You still got the photographic memory?" I broke in.

"Here's a list," he said, ignoring my question. "All the miracles and all the names of the people involved. We need an answer in the next couple of days."

He slid the list across the desk.

"Well, do ya?" I persisted.

"Yes, of course. But I'm not here to entertain you. Take a look at that list. We need to get started."

"You're not as much fun as you were the last time," I observed, picking up the list. "Shorts too tight, or is it this lawyer business?"

"Sorry, Joe. It's just—well, this is the first time they've given me any responsibility. I realize it's only because nobody else at the firm wanted to fool with it. But I have to show them something."

My eyes traveled down the list and stopped at Mordechai Shum.

"Buster," I said out loud.

"What?"

"I know one of the people on the list, Mordechai Shum—Buster. I heard he was camped out in that church. Didn't make the connection until I spied his name on the list. I might be able to help you out. It says here that his warts miraculously vanished. If that dud ever had any warts, they were sprouting on his brain."

"You think we should talk to him first?" McDermott asked.

"First let's talk about my fee."

"Well, naturally the firm would pay your standard fee plus expenses," said McDermott.

"And if the miracles turn out to be phony, then what?"

McDermott shrugged. "I don't know. Let the bishop decide, I guess."

I folded the list and stuffed it in my shirt pocket. "Buster is a nitwit. He couldn't pick a winning Trifecta in a three horse field," I said. "He's crooked enough to engineer something like this, but it's doubtful he has the intellect. Have you considered that these might be genuine healings?"

"That's what we hired you to find out," said McDermott with an extra-cheesy grin. "And I'd like to tag along. Be like old times."

"You can come along with one stipulation—no spoutin' poetry like last time," I warned. "And I'd like to see you do that memory trick you do. You know—when you close your eyes and recall word for word something you've read in the past."

"Like what? You don't want to hear any poetry." He paused and his eyes darted to my small book-

case at the head of the cot. He rolled the client chair nearer to it without rising and took a thin book from the shelf. It was *McCalister's Favorite Quotations*. "I've read this," he said, handing it to me. "Pick a page."

Now we were getting somewhere. I let the book fall open.

"Page forty one," I announced, allowing my finger to slide down the list of quotes, counting each one. I stopped in the middle of the page. "The sixth quote from the top."

McDermott closed his eyes and tilted his head back ever so slightly. It was several seconds before he began to recite. "If you swallow a live frog every morning, nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day."

I nodded. "Yep. That's perfect—word for word. You sure there isn't some trick to it? I can't believe you can do that. It's amazing. Can you do it again?"

"I'll make a deal with you," said McDermott. "This is your book, right? You've read it?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll give you three quotes from the book. If you can tell me whom I'm quoting just once, I'll double your fee. If not, you lose; and you agree never to ask me to do the trick again—ever. How about it?"

"Hmm. I'll have to think it over," I told him.

"You do that," said McDermott. "Now, let's get started. What's first?"

"We talk to Buster first," I said. "You still driving the BMW? The clutch is out on my Mustang. Can't back up. I've been driving in second gear for three days."

McDermott wanted to make a

beeline to the church, but I pointed out that in an hour it would be post time at Calder. The odds of finding Buster anywhere but the racetrack after post time were about the same as finding a penguin on the moon. Which raised an interesting point. Could it just be a coincidence that all these miraculous events happened only on Wednesday afternoons—the only day Calder was dark and closed to the public?

It was a pretty good crowd for a Monday. I asked Stiff Lip Henry Oat and some of the other regulars about Buster. They directed me to the simulcast monitors on the second level. This was a section of the track geared to simulcast betting. Five or six TV monitors displayed the races at various tracks. It was possible to bet Belmont, Keenland, Calder, Hawthorne, and several other tracks at the Calder windows and watch from a nice cushy seat. Nonstop action.

"Where is he?" McDermott asked as I scanned the unwashed minions.

"I don't see him, but there's Raisin Brain," I revealed.

"Raisin Brain?"

I nodded in the direction of a thin, ragged individual who gave the impression, in appearance, in apparel, and in demeanor, of being totally used up. "He's an old club fighter. Got his bell rung a few times too many. Him and Buster are pretty chummy."

"He was a boxer?" asked McDermott. "What name did he fight under?"

"You won't believe it?"

"Try me."

"Kid Klineberger," I told him. I watched his head tilt back and his eyes close as he dug into his incredible memory.

After a few seconds he announced, "Kid Klineberger, ninety-seven losses and six wins. Fought as a middleweight from 1973 through 1984. Not ranked."

"McDermott!" I said in surprise. "I didn't know you were a fight fan."

"I'm not a fight fan," he sputtered as if he were spitting out a beetle. "I recently researched some statistical books on boxing for Robski, one of the partners. He's defending a client—a light heavyweight contender."

"Too bad. I had hopes for you."

It was still fourteen minutes to post for the first at Calder. Raisin Brain was slouched in the middle of the aisle studying his simulcast program. McDermott and I took vacant seats on either side of him.

Raisin Brain lifted his innocent eyes to me as I sat down. "Hi, Joe," he said in his slow, methodical way. "You know my mother died? She used to make me chocolate chip cookies. They were good."

"Your mother died three years ago, Raisin," I reminded him, then wished I hadn't.

"Yeah," he replied. "She did."

I decided it wouldn't serve any purpose to beat about the bush, so I came right out with it. "You seen Buster around anywhere?"

"I don't like Buster no more," he said, looking down at his program. "He kicked Rudolfo Gomez. Hurt him, too."

When you talked to Raisin, you had to draw him out to discover

what he was talking about. "That don't sound good," I said. "Why did he kick Rudolfo Gomez?"

A faint smile formed on his worn features. "Rudolfo Gomez did number one on his pants leg."

"Number one," said McDermott. "Does that mean—"

"He took a leak on his leg," I said.

"That's right," said Raisin. "Then the reverend begun using Jesus' name in vain 'cause it was runnin' down under the pew. He told me and Rudolfo Gomez to get out. I had to carry Rudolfo Gomez 'cause his leg was hurt."

"This Rudolfo Gomez, who is he?" I asked.

"A middleweight like me," Raisin said, then added, "He's dead."

I looked at McDermott, who tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "Rudolfo Gomez, Middleweight, forty-nine wins, six losses, two draws. Ranked ninth in the WBA. Died after a loss in the ring in 1978."

Raisin looked at McDermott with new respect. "Yeah, that's right," he confirmed.

I spoke to him slowly. "Raisin, if Rudolfo Gomez is dead, who peed on Buster's leg?"

"My dog."

"And your dog's name is—?"

"Rudolfo Gomez. I named him after Rudolfo Gomez. He was the highest ranking middleweight I ever fought. Knocked me out eight seconds into the first round."

Raisin Brain was a funny little guy. He rarely made a bet. He just seemed to like the crowd around him. It took another ten minutes to extract the whole story from him.

Buster had offered Raisin ten dollars to take his dog into the church so that Pastor Evans could take pictures. According to Raisin, for the last few weeks Buster had been passing out ten dollar bills to his racetrack acquaintances when they showed up at the Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church for the Wednesday afternoon service. A picture was beginning to form.

McDermott attempted to drag me out, but I managed to put twenty across on a two-year-old out of Devil's Bag in the first at Calder with McDermott tugging at my arm. The colt ran second, paid five twenty and three sixty. I picked up eighty-eight bucks for a twenty dollar bet. Probably would have been a good day. But it's difficult to focus on a selection with someone breathing and shouting in your ear and grabbing at your body.

McDermott maintained a tight grip on my arm as we dashed headlong toward the parking lot.

"What's the rush?" I asked. "I was only going to get a trifecta ticket in the second race, then we could go."

"Right," said McDermott. "Remember, I've been to the track with you before."

I pulled my arm away and stopped fifteen feet from McDermott's BMW.

"Are you implying that I'm not professional?"

"I'm not implying anything. I just want to get the show on the road."

"All right then. Make it five," I told him.

"Five what?"

"You give me five quotations out of my book instead of three. If I get



one right, you double my fee. And they have to be somebody I've heard of—not some Doofus Nobody.”

“Anything else?”

“I guess not.”

“You want to try one now?”

When I nodded, his head tilted slightly. After a few seconds he said, “It’s been my experience that folks who have no vices have very few virtues.”

“Ah, wait a minute. I know that one. It’s either Mark Twain or Winston Churchill.” I paused for verification. None was forthcoming.

“What’s your guess?”

“Mark Twain.”

“Abe Lincoln. Want to go again?”

“Okay.”

Back went the head. “Those who stand for nothing will put up with anything.”

“Okay, okay, I got this one. It’s Ronald Reagan or Winston Churchill?”

“Your guess?”

“Ronald Reagan.”

“Nope. Alexander Hamilton.”

I could see that the quotation business was tougher than it looked.

It was curious that Buster wasn’t at the track. It didn’t figure that he was broke if he was passing out ten dollar bills to his cronies. I put it aside for the moment as the BMW glided down Eighteenth Street past majestic, empty St. Ignatius Catholic Cathedral.

The Eighteenth Street Gospel Brethren Church was a wooden structure in a cement block world. It suggested a large duplex apartment building, but the steeple gave it away. The glass-enclosed sign on the front lawn invited every pass-

ing sinner to join the healing miracles on Wednesday afternoons. It also announced a Monday afternoon Bible class.

Inside it wasn’t large as churches go. There were six or seven people in the front pews. A fellow with a Bible in his hands seemed to be directing the proceedings.

“You folks here for the Bible study group?” he asked us. “Take a seat. We’re just about to start.”

“You Evans?” I asked.

He admitted to being Pastor Evans. I explained that we wanted to talk to Buster.

“I haven’t seen Mordechai since last Wednesday afternoon,” Evans told us. “He simply vanished—left without a word.”

“I understand you were taking pictures of a dog in here last Wednesday evening,” McDermott said. “What was that all about?”

Before Evans could reply, I gave McDermott a let-me-ask-the-questions stare that he could not misinterpret. To Evans I said, “Is there someplace we can discuss this in private?”

“Can you take over for a minute, Orville?” Evans said, handing the Bible to a tall, skinny guy with an Adam’s apple the size of a sugar beet. He might very well have had a Snickers stuck in his throat.

“No pr-pr-problem, pa-pa-pa-reverend,” Orville managed, taking the Holy Book.

McDermott refused to wait patiently in the wings. “Isn’t that the guy who was supposed to be miraculously cured of stuttering at one of your services?” he asked, anger pushing his words.

"He's a lot better. You should have heard him before," said the good pastor, ushering us into his office.

"I don't believe this," McDermott muttered, almost under his breath. Inside the office he walked behind the desk to eyeball up close a framed diploma that hung on the wall. " 'Ordained by the Gospel Brethren Church of Muncie, Indiana,' " he read aloud. He turned to Pastor Evans. "How long did you study for the ministry?"

"It took about four days to get the diploma after I sent in the coupon," Evans admitted.

McDermott's lips were moving, but nothing was coming out. I broke in before something did.

"It appears that some of these so-called miracles were staged—like stuttering Orville, the raising of the dead dog, and Buster's warts for instance."

"Of course they were staged," Evans admitted. "How else can you prime the pump and sow the seed?"

"You want to elaborate on that?" I asked.

"People have to believe—they have to have faith that they will be healed. What better way than to demonstrate that others have already experienced the healing power of the Lord? It works. Look at Mrs. Gertwonk. Tumor on her neck the size of a Belgian waffle. Three days after the Wednesday service the tumor disappeared. I got before and after pictures and her doctor's affidavit. And there are several more just like her. So you see, it works."

"That's crazy," I said.

"Maybe not," said McDermott.

"It's a common practice to conduct a double blind trial when testing a new drug. The problem is that the state of mind of a patient is often a significant factor in the effect of a course of treatment. That's why doctors cultivate their bedside manner. They know how important the state of mind of the patient is. And that's why all new medicines are tested against a placebo. The patients in the trial are randomly divided into two groups. One group is given the real medicine, the other is given the placebo. Neither group knows which they have been given. Hence the state of mind for both groups will be similar, and any difference between the two groups must be due to the drug being tested. Such is the power of the mind over the body."

"Then you're buying this crap he's putting out?" I asked.

"Not really, I'm just saying the mind has power over the body."

I turned back to Pastor Evans. "I'd like to take a look at Buster's room."

"Are you the police?" the pastor asked.

"Are you expecting the police?"

"No, of course not," said Evans. "I haven't broken any laws."

"That's still open to debate," said McDermott.

Evans led us to a small room in the back of the church. Knowing Buster and his low ways for many years, I almost expected to see green slime on the walls.

Surprisingly, while not exactly tidy, the room appeared to be without visible scum. There was a bathroom with a shower stall. I began to

scrutinize the room while McDermott pressed the conversation with Pastor Evans. The taciturn Evans stood watching me while McDermott pummeled him with accusations.

"So you admit that Buster was paying his racetrack friends to come to the Wednesday afternoon services? And you were paying some of them to claim they were cured?"

Evans shrugged. "Sure. It was God's work. They needed the money. I needed to build the faith. Many continue to attend without being paid. Some actually believed they were cured of something and told their friends."

Buster's closet was a bar stuck between indentations in the wall. I counted one pair of shoes, eight shirts, and three pairs of pants. I noticed a wristwatch on the small table by the bed. Wadded up on the bathroom floor was a towel covered with obvious bloodstains.

I pointed out these things to Evans. "Don't you think it strange that he didn't take his clothes with him? That he left without taking his watch? It must have been a very sudden decision."

"I assumed he was coming back," Evans said.

I nodded. "Okay, what about the bloodstained towel?"

"What bloodstained towel?"

I picked it up from the floor by the corner and displayed it before his face.

"This one."

For the first time he seemed visibly rattled. "I never saw that before."

"I think what happened here is obvious," McDermott announced. "Buster was blackmailing you for paying people to claim they were cured. You couldn't take it any more and you killed him."

"I did not," said the pastor.

"Come on, where did you put the body?" McDermott turned to me without waiting for an answer. "Joe, we have to tell the police. I'm sure this guy killed him and hid the body."

"I don't know. Things are not always what they seem. You don't have a body. You can't even be sure he's dead. You sure as hell can't be sure he was murdered. And if he was, how do you know the pastor did it? There might be some other explanation for all of this."

"What explanation? What about the bloody towel? What about Buster's not showing up at the track? The clothes, the watch . . . what other explanation is there? I tell you, he did it."

I was getting impatient with him. "You know, McDermott, for somebody as intelligent as you are, you aren't too smart. For starters, why would the pastor kill Buster for misdeeds that he freely admits to us? And if he did murder him, he certainly would have gotten rid of the clothes and the bloody towel, don't you think?"

His wheels were turning fast. "Eh . . . maybe," he admitted.

I turned to Evans. "You're going to have to quit paying people to say they were cured. That's fraud. If it happens again, I'm going to report you to Bunco."

"It's okay. My work is almost

completed anyway. My congregation has quadrupled in the last month."

As we were about to leave, I spotted something written in an awkward scrawl across a church magazine on the nightstand by the bed. I rolled it up and took it with me out the door. Stuttering Orville was working on the word Philistines as we passed the Bible study group and headed to the BMW.

McDermott slid behind the wheel. "What's next?"

The best I could make out from the nearly illegible scribbling on the cover of the magazine was *Mon Eve near Homsteco 24*. The handwriting appeared that of an intellectual midget. It was probably written by Buster. But what did it mean?

"What do you make of this?" I handed McDermott the magazine.

He studied the writing intently. "It's not any of the Germanic or other European languages that I speak. And it's not Spanish. But there is a definite Latin influence."

"Are you for real?" I said. "It's obviously just something Buster scribbled there."

"Oh. Well, I can't make it out." McDermott handed it back to me. He hit the ignition, and the BMW came to life with a rush of understated, quiet power. "Where to?"

The only thing clear in the scribbling was the number 24. I did the logical thing. I turned to page twenty-four. Page twenty-four, near the end of the magazine, was full of classified ads. I studied them one by one, but nothing grabbed me right off. The only ad on the page with

"Mon" and "Eve" in it was an ad for Orthodox Christian Hymn Books and Christmas Cards. But it fit; the address was a post office box in Homestead, Florida.

"Look at this," I said. "Monastery of the Everglades, in Homestead, Florida.' That's what the note on the cover is all about. That's where we'll go next."

Homestead is south of Miami on the road to the Florida Keys. Homestead's big claim to fame is that it was practically blown away by hurricane Andrew a few years back. It would take the better part of an hour to make it down there.

"You think Buster might be in the monastery?" McDermott asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Actually, we've already finished with what you hired me to do. Namely, to find out if the miracles were genuine or not. I'd have to say they were bogus. As far as Buster's concerned, the only reason we need to find him now is to satisfy the questions you raised about his existence or lack thereof."

We rode in silence for several minutes. "Want to try a quotation?" McDermott asked.

I had come to regret my hasty decision to participate in the quotation wager. You have to be a sap to play the other guy's game. But I didn't see a way to weasel out now.

McDermott's eyelids slid down, then back up within a split second. "You ready?"

I indicated that I was.

He offered up the following: "We are gentlemen that neither in our hearts nor outward eyes envy the great nor shall the low despise."

"Here's one for you, McDermott," I said. "I was born in the morning, but it wasn't yesterday."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I told you no poetry. That was poetry. It don't count."

"It was a legitimate quotation from William Shakespeare," McDermott argued.

"Now it really don't count because you told me the answer. Damn, that's who I was going to guess, too."

McDermott grinned. "Okay, we'll skip that one—it doesn't count. Let's try this one: 'There is no explanation for evil. It must be looked upon as a necessary part of the order of the universe. To ignore it is childish, to bewail it senseless.'"

"Boy, that's a pretty tough one. How about a hint?"

"I don't remember anything in the agreement about hints."

"You're purposely pulling out every obscure quote you can find," I said. "A hint isn't going to make any difference 'cause I don't have a clue."

"Okay, I'll give you a hint. The person who said that was a famous writer."

"Well there, see? That really narrows it down, doesn't it?" I paused to shuffle through the few famous writers that jumped to mind. Not a real witty quote—straightforward, tell it like it is. No fancy language. Not Steinbeck or Faulkner or any of the Irishmen; maybe Hemingway. But pretty stilted for Hemingway. What the hell.

"Hemingway," I guessed.

"Sorry, it was Somerset Maugham," said McDermott, a grin on his

face. He was really beginning to enjoy my squirming. "How many is that anyway? Let's see, that's three now, not counting Shakespeare. Right?"

"That wasn't a fair hint," I shot back. "Somerset Maugham wasn't all that famous."

McDermott ignored my protest. "That's three," he said, poking three fingers at me. Sniffing victory, he giggled ungraciously in my face.

It took only a few minutes to get directions to the Monastery of the Everglades. It took a lot longer to follow the directions and find the place. The monastery was tucked in the bosom of a cypress swamp. A detour of a mere yard off the road leading in, on either side, and the BMW, McDermott, and I would have been sucked into black-mired oblivion without hope of recovery.

On the only chunk of dry ground around, a collection of six or eight small wooden and block buildings composed the Monastery of the Everglades. The structures all reverberated with a similar motif: one of cheerful, picturesque desolation. There was an ornate fountain in the central courtyard—without water. The only vehicle was a battered old Plymouth station wagon parked at the south end of the buildings.

McDermott pulled the BMW in alongside the Plymouth. He left the engine running. "What's this Buster like, anyway?" he asked while we savored the AC. "I take it you've known him a long time."

"He's the type of guy who used to boast to the boys at the track about visiting his bedridden grandmoth-

er so he could steal money from her purse." I paused to watch a couple of brown-robed guys in sandals shuffling across the courtyard. They seemed oblivious to us. "His first wife was working to support him and her two kids. It's rumored he burned her house down for the insurance money. Those are a few of the high spots, but you get the idea. Picture somebody absolutely virtueless, without character, and incredibly stupid. Once you've done that, think of somebody worse and you have Buster."

"You think he's really here?"

"I don't know. I can't think of any possible reason a scumbag like Buster would visit a monastery. But that's what the note on the magazine implied."

"Want to try one more quote before we go in? I'll make it an easy one."

I didn't have much hope of identifying one of his stupid quotations or beating him out of a double fee, but just as well to get it over with. His glee at my wrong answers was beginning to torment me.

"Go ahead," I told him.

McDermott did his memory bit. "A man's got to take a lot of punishment to write a really funny book.' And if you want a hint, that was also said by a famous writer." He followed this pronouncement with a depraved smirk.

"An easy one, huh." He was a swine. It would be just like him to use Somerset Maugham again. The quote was obviously said by somebody who didn't write very funny books. Maugham didn't write very funny books.

"Somerset Maugham," I said.

"Ernest Hemingway," said McDermott, fighting desperately to keep from laughing out loud.

"Damn! I knew you were going to do something like that."

Brother Purvey met us at the entrance. I inquired after the whereabouts of Mordechai. He didn't know of a Mordechai, so I ran through several of his aliases.

"You are speaking of the Fledgling Buster."

"Fledgling?" asked McDermott.

"That is how we address newcomers who have subscribed to the order but have not as yet attained the proper spiritual reverence to gain full acceptance and position."

Brother Purvey instructed us to wait by the fountain. It wasn't long before I spotted Buster trudging toward us in a mustard colored robe.

Buster is a decent enough looking fellow, handsome by some standards, except that on each side of the bridge of his nose are the ugly bite marks left by Mr. Buster, non-winner of four starts other than maiden, claiming, or starter in a lifetime.

"Joe, what you doin' here?" said Buster.

"The question is," I shot back, "what the hell are you doing here?"

"Don't say hell," Buster cautioned. "The whole place is sacred. You can't say that stuff here."

"Sorry," I said. "Let me put it another way. Why are you in a monastery?"

"I'm dying, Joe," Buster said. "I ain't got long left. I come here to get salvation for all the bad stuff I did. So's I can get into heaven."



"What makes you think you're dying?" I asked.

"The nosebleeds. I been havin' them regular. Almost choked to death in my sleep the other night on my own blood. I had to do somethin', so I went to Doc Warren. He examined me and said I had this aner—anertism."

"Aneurysm?" said McDermott.

"Yeah, that's it," said Buster. "The doc says I only got a few weeks left before a blood vessel in my brain is gonna blow up and I die."

"So the nosebleed explains the bloody towel in the bathroom," said McDermott, displaying his marvelous grasp of the obvious. "We know about how you and the pastor were faking miracles at the church," he plunged callously on. "But how did you make the press believe it? The reporters talked to that fellow Orville. I read the story. How did he talk to the press without stuttering?"

"We got him drunk," said Buster. "He don't stutter real bad when he's drunk. Anyway, those reporters seemed more interested in the story than in findin' out if it was true or not. We just told 'em somethin' and then had everybody else swear to it. They never did no more checkin'."

"You left your clothes and your watch," said McDermott. "Why was that?"

"You have to leave your worldly possessions behind to join the monastery," said Buster. He looked closely at McDermott. "Who the hell are you?"

"He's helping me out on a case," I said. "You went to Doc Warren? I

thought you and him weren't getting along since he caught you stealing the spare tire off his jeep."

"He hates me," Buster admitted. "But I didn't have the money to go anywhere else."

"I'm truly sorry to hear about your illness," said McDermott with labored sincerity. He turned to me. "I guess we're finished here."

"Good luck, Buster," I offered as we turned to go.

"Yeah, thanks," said Buster in utter despair.

Silence reigned for the first five minutes of the ride back to Miami. Then McDermott went for the jugular.

"We might as well finish it," he said. "How about this one." His eyelids slipped down for a fraction of a second; then he spoke. "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last."

I had him. It was time to twist the knife, so to speak. "I guess I should confess. You never stumped me. I knew them all."

"Of course you did. So why don't you tell me your guess?"

"You think I'm kidding? I don't have to guess. The last quote was spoken by Winston Churchill. He was probably talking about Chamberlain. Of whom he also said, 'He was given the choice between war and dishonor. He chose dishonor, and he will have war anyway.'"

McDermott smiled broadly.

"It was a gift for a job well done, Joe. I knew you'd know that one. A big Churchill fan like you—no way I could slide anything Churchill said past you."

I let it rest. We rode in silence for

another five minutes before McDermott spoke again. "I was kind of hoping there might be something to the miracles. But I guess not."

"I wouldn't say that," I countered. "Buster joining a monastery has got to be a bona fide miracle. And I don't think we're done with the miracles yet."

"Really? What miracle are you talking about?"

"Well," I said, "Buster went to Doc Warren for his examination. Doc Warren is the track vet. He could-

n't possibly diagnose an aneurysm. And he hates Buster. He probably looked up his nose and pronounced the death sentence. He knows Buster's an idiot. You don't get many chances like that to get even. As for the nosebleeds, Buster's been complaining about them ever since the horse bit him in the face. He'll probably outlive both of us. And the miracle to come—well, what do you think Buster will call it when he don't die in a coupla months? Remember, he's extra stupid."

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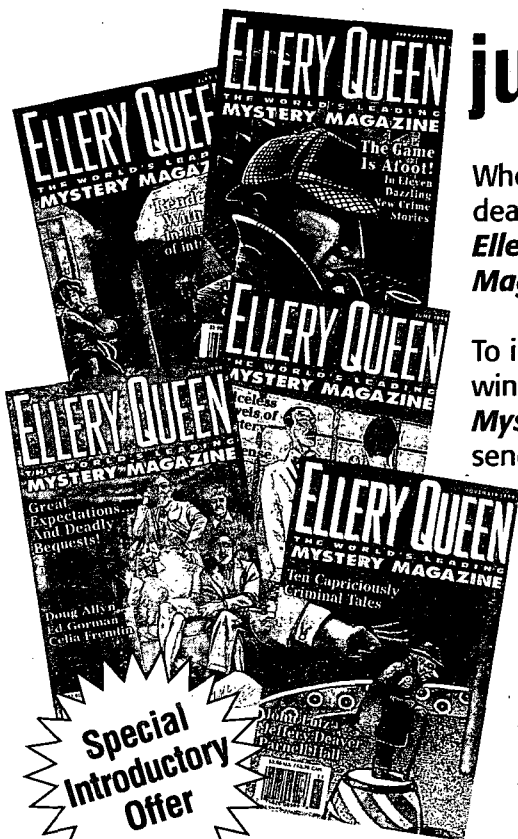
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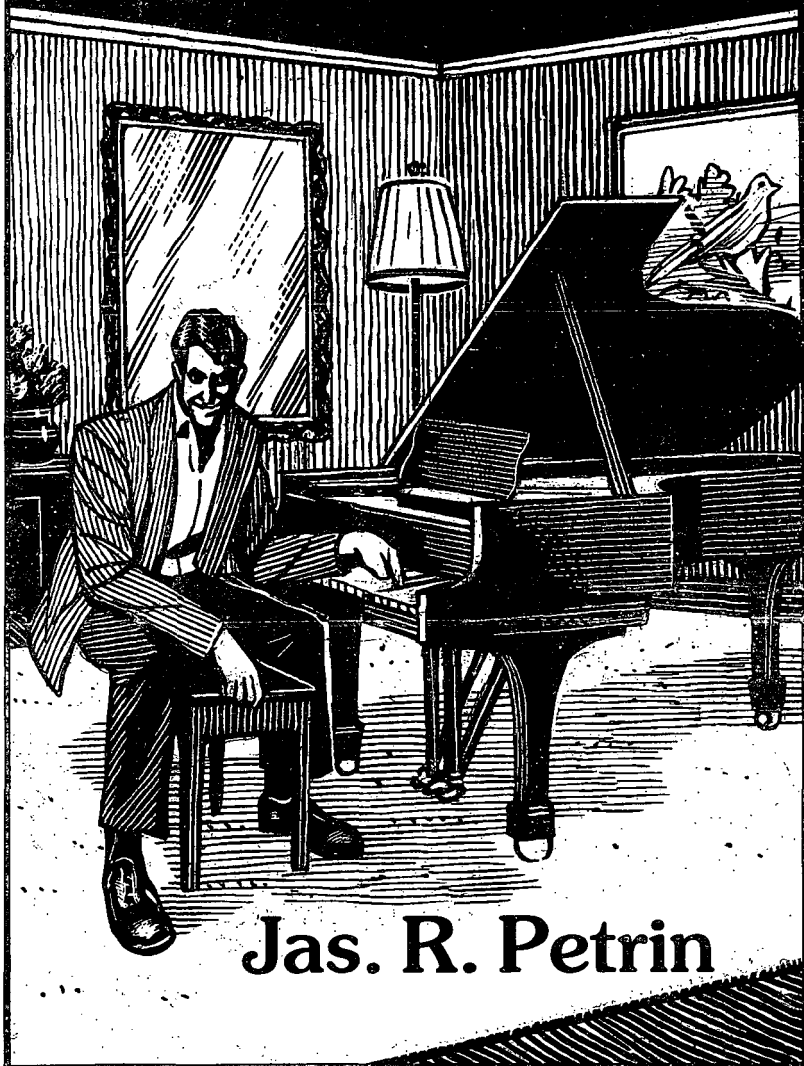
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FICTION

# THE PIANO



Jas. R. Petrin

*Illustration by Dan Krovatín*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01*

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**A**s luck would have it, Wilson Friendly turned the wrong way getting out of the elevator and walked a few strides along the corridor before realizing the fact. The apartment he wanted—8-D—was back the other way. He turned in time to see a small, nimble man duck into the stairwell, a man who fit the description of E. Manfred Perryman.

Like the bear he resembled, Friendly could move at startling speeds for short distances, and he caught the smaller man halfway down the stairs between the third and second floor landings. Perryman wasn't keen on returning, so Friendly half carried him under one arm back up to the eighth floor.

"Okay," the little guy said into Friendly's vast side pocket, his voice muffled and embarrassed, "all right already! Put me down and we'll talk, I've got no problem with that." So they walked back to 8-D together, Friendly keeping one large guiding paw on Perryman's shoulder until they were inside the apartment with the door closed.

Friendly put the chain on, thinking that at least it would slow Perryman down if the man decided to make another run for it.

It was an impressively furnished and decorated place—lavish in fact. Friendly could make this assessment, having developed a very good feel for quality in his line of work. A Donald Deskey black-lacquer cabinet and two aluminum Deskey chairs, all art moderne; a Meeks parlor suite; an ormolu table, and various lamps he would need more time to assess but that looked very

fine. An Audubon *Yellow Magpie* print. And in the middle of it all stood the grand piano.

It was a seven foot long model B Steinway, with a 439 serial number that put its date of manufacture in 1975. It crouched in the room, black and gleaming. The Porsche of pianos if Friendly's research was accurate.

And Friendly's research was always accurate.

"Why don't I tell you right away why I'm here," Friendly told Perryman, "so that we understand each other right off."

"Tell me," Perryman said in a defeated tone. "I'm waiting."

The instant Friendly released him, the little fellow scurried to the bar and began rattling ice into a clouded blue tumbler. A quality tumbler, Friendly perceived. Perryman shrugged out of his jacket and worked in his shirtsleeves, the shirt a pale blue pinstripe, with wide blue braces supporting pleated wool slacks. He was wiry and athletic in a flyweight sort of way, pretty much what Friendly expected after carting the tough, struggling body back up the stairs.

"It's about the piano," Friendly explained. "About the payments."

Perryman's slitted eyes gave nothing away. He had splashed scotch into the tumbler but hadn't touched it yet, standing where he was and measuring Friendly over its rim. He said, affecting surprise, "The music store is hiring gorillas now?"

"No, sir," replied Friendly politely, "I work for myself. I bought your bad debt off the piano house, so now

the instrument is mine." He took the legal papers out of his inside pocket and held them out to Perryman—copies, of course—but Perryman didn't bother to reach for them. Instead he took a careful swallow of scotch while Friendly dropped the papers on the coffee table saying, "I'll give you my best deal. You make the outstanding payments up front including the back interest owing, then resume the original installments—certified checks only, payable to me—or you settle up in cash for the entire outstanding balance, which I believe is ..." he made a show of leaning over the papers, already knowing the amount exactly "... fourteen thousand, seven hundred and thirty-five dollars, eleven cents. I'll forget the eleven cents."

"You're all heart, aren't you?"

Perryman hadn't even winced at the figure. He was either used to having large amounts requested of him or he had slipped into the realm of not giving a damn any more. Friendly encountered both types routinely. And the little fellow looked amused. Maybe the liquor was beginning to speak to him. He was shaking his head in a measured and discouraging way.

"You can forget the settling up idea. I don't have that kind of cash on hand. And I won't be making payments very soon either, since it seems I have—how do they put it?—a temporary liquidity problem."

One thing Friendly knew when he got this excuse was that "temporary" under such circumstances could very easily slip into "permanent." But something about E. Man-

fred Perryman suggested otherwise. He saw in Perryman the type of guy who'd had funds before and would have them again, perhaps several times throughout his life: the type who had affluence wash over him and recede from him like recurring tidal surges.

"Okay," he said, "here's your second option. Give me the back payments right now, and we work out lower installments at higher interest over a longer term. If you don't think you can do that—" he walked over to the baby grand and rested his knuckles gently on the black enamel "—it goes to auction. That's your third option. I take what's due to me and anything left over, probably zero, goes to you. Worst case for you, you're out everything you've paid so far."

"What? That's over five thousand dollars!"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Sorry it's a problem. It would be a lot better for me if you could pay the note off right now. Otherwise it'll cost me the movers, probably storage fees, and a fat percentage to the auction house. I'd be happier with some other arrangement. This thing, crated, goes a thousand pounds. I know because I looked it up." He glanced around. "How did they get it in here?"

"With a crane. They had to pop the sliding balcony doors completely out."

"See?" said Friendly. "The labor could kill me."

"I'll sell it myself and pay you off."

"Sorry, I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"



"It isn't yours to sell, for starters. It's got a lien on it. Besides, you could swallow the proceeds and give me nothing, and then I'd have to chase you through the courts. With what I've already paid, and then the legal fees, that could also go very bad for me. Best I could hope for is to be lumped in with the rest of your creditors and wind up with twenty cents on the dollar. And that's if I'm lucky. So, no, I don't think I could go for that."

Perryman swished his drink around and studied his glass. "Three options, huh? It sounds awfully complicated. Why didn't the piano folks just hire you to collect for them directly?" He wasn't questioning Friendly's credentials, he was just curious.

"Some businesses have gotten stung that way. Sued for their collection practices. They hire some goon, he gets rough with people, next thing they know they're on the local news. It's bad for trade. If they sell the debt to me, it's out of their hands. How I go about the collecting after that is my business."

"And how *do* you go about it? Apart from dragging people up staircases."

"You weren't listening," Friendly said. "What I try to do is give people options."

"I heard a few, and I didn't like them."

"I didn't expect you to. They'll cost you money. Sorry, but there's no easy fix for this."

Perryman said, "I could always declare personal bankruptcy."

"I wouldn't. The big credit bu-

reaus—Equifax, Trans Union, Experian—would open a file on you. As of ten o'clock this morning your record was clear with them, and if I were you, I'd want to keep it that way."

"You checked, did you?"

"Of course."

Perryman studied Friendly for a long moment as though completely reassessing his visitor. His angular little head was cocked slightly forward, his suddenly empty glass held up high near his chin. He wasn't as angry now. What good would anger do?

"Say, would you like a drink?"

"I wouldn't say no to a white rum and coke. But it won't influence me."

"That's too bad. But I think I ought to give the stuff away before somebody comes to the door and slaps a lien on it."

Perryman mixed the drink, a generous one, went over and put it into Friendly's hand. He poured another scotch for himself, took it back, and sat down on the sofa.

"So you do this sort of thing for a living? Dumb question. Of course you do." He was talking without listening. "Any openings in your line of work?" A quick assessment of Friendly's bulk with a lift of his eyebrows. "I guess my size is against me. I'll never be a linebacker either."

"At least you're keeping your sense of humor."

"That's about all I'm going to keep by the look of it. That and maybe my socks." He raised his glass. "Cheers. What's your name, anyway?"

Friendly raised his own glass, took a sip, then told Perryman his name, waiting for the usual smart-ass response. But Perryman surprised him.

"Good name. It suits you. You haven't threatened to break my legs. Yet."

"How did you get into this mess?" Friendly was in danger of breaking his own rule—keep it businesslike, never get close to these people—but for some reason he felt okay with it this time; it was hard not to like Perryman. He settled himself in a leather armchair sized like himself, briefly wondering if it were Australian calf, and said, "Bad news from your broker? Ugly divorce?"

"Neither."

Friendly sat patiently, allowing Perryman to construct his answer. The little man sank so deep into thought he finally had to prompt the guy to make him surface.

"What was it, then?"

"It was a business problem. Bad advice."

"Excuse me?"

"Bad advice and I leaped without looking."

"How did that happen?"

"The way it always does. I trusted somebody."

Friendly nodded. "A woman, huh?"

"You've been down that street."

"Only as a tourist. I'm not the trusting sort."

"Neither am I, usually. But with this lady, well . . ."

As if on cue a key moved in the lock, the apartment door popped open and pulled up short against

the chain. Someone spoke, there was a sudden violent blow, and the door burst inward, one of its brass screws skipping across the parquet and rolling to a stop at Friendly's feet. A very tall, very gangly, but powerful-looking man leaned into the room, glanced around, and said over his shoulder, "It's okay. There's only him here and some fat guy."

Friendly knew he wasn't going to like this joker. For one thing he didn't take to people who entered rooms in this way—oh, he'd done it himself occasionally and would again, but only after knocking first. The second thing was that he didn't like being called fat. He wasn't fat, he was solid.

And then the redhead came in. Friendly knew instinctively that she was the woman E. Manfred Perryman had been referring to. The woman who'd ruined him. She was, to borrow an inadequate phrase, drop-dead gorgeous, and Friendly could see how a man might be overwhelmed by her. But trust her? Not a chance. Friendly couldn't see that at all.

She was dressed like a pop star: spike-heeled sandals, hip-hugger jeans, and a white top that showed a hand's breadth of midriff. Her hair hung in a forward arc above her shoulders, swinging when she turned her head. She had the poise of a figure skater and hazel eyes.

"Good," she said. "I'm not too late. They haven't come by and cleaned the place out yet."

"I told you on the phone," said Perryman without emotion, "what's here is all spoken for. Some of it—the rugs, the drapes—came with

the lease, the rest goes where it came from." He gave Friendly a wink. "Good thing you came when you did."

The redhead had worked her way far enough into the room to stand behind the sofa with her fingers ruffling Perryman's hair as though he were a dog that she could do what she liked with. And like a dog he took it. She spoke to Perryman, but her eyes were on Friendly.

"So aren't you going to introduce me?"

"Wilson Friendly," said Perryman, "meet Reanne Nowicki—"

"Norwick," she said with a beautiful smile, "he doesn't listen."

"—and the guy casing the joint is Otis Weeks," Perryman finished.

"Pleased to meet you," Reanne said. "Say hello to the man, Otis."

Otis grunted something unintelligible and continued skulking around the room, looking at each item in turn as if he had seen it in a catalogue someplace. He finally settled at the piano, long legs straddling the bench. His open tweed jacket drooped heavily on the left side; there was a gun tucked away in there if Friendly weren't mistaken.

"Nice day," said Friendly to both of them, waiting to learn something.

The redhead wasn't volunteering much either and came around the end of the sofa to stand in front of E. Manfred Perryman, claiming his full attention.

"Seriously," she said, "what do you mean, it's all spoken for?"

"Just what I said."

"But this stuff is half mine."

"How did that happen? You didn't pay for half of it."

"Whether I paid for it or not has got nothing to do with it. We lived common-law."

"For three months."

"Still, that gives me rights."

"I'm not sure about that. But I know one thing. If you want anything out of me, you're going to have to get in line."

"I don't get in line. I thought you knew that. After me everybody else comes first."

"Now *that* I know," Perryman said. "So what exactly are you staking a claim to, besides everything in the place?"

"Right now I want the rest of my clothes, shoes, some jewelry I left behind. I'll send a truck around for the furniture."

"I hope it's a fast truck. You already missed out on the piano."

She scowled suddenly. Ugly on such a pretty face.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. The piano is spoken for. That's why Friendly's here. It's his piano now."

"You sold it to him?"

"Somebody did. He came to get it."

"Over my dead body." She turned crossly to Otis. "He can't take the piano away from me, can he?"

"Over my dead body," echoed Otis idly but harshly knocking out notes on the Steinway with a thick forefinger.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't do that," said Friendly evenly, watching Otis Weeks. "I'm no piano expert, but that can't be good for it."

"You are not taking this piano!" the redhead stated with conviction. She meant to leave no doubt about the fact. She strode off to the inner recesses of the apartment, Otis sauntering after her with a lopsided grin on his face.

"Isn't she lovely?" Perryman said.

"A sweetheart," agreed Friendly, not sure if Perryman was referring to her looks or her temperament. Which ever it was, Friendly could afford to admire her on looks alone. But he was curious. "What bad advice did she give you?"

Perryman got up without responding right away, took Friendly's glass, and went to the bar. He scooped up some ice.

"Oh, that part of it wasn't her fault. I'm to blame." He glanced back at Friendly, his hands finding the bottles without help. "Like I told you, I trusted her too much. What that led to is that I didn't double-check the information." He brought two fresh drinks back with him. "The way it happened was she got a tip somewhere. Well, I shouldn't say 'somewhere.' *Then* I would have double-checked. It was from a very good source. A guy she used to work for, a genius in real estate."

"Real estate?"

"Yeah, bigtime. Hotels, condos, bungalows all over the Caribbean. A millionaire multi-times over."

"How did you know he was a genius?"

"Reanne told me."

Friendly cleared his throat. "All right. So he gave you this tip..."

"He gave it to Reanne, actually, and she passed it along. It was a lead on some big seniors' develop-

ment that him and some other heavyweights were about to sink big bucks into. A project in Barbados. He showed her a booklet, a—what-do-you-call-it..."

"Prospectus."

"That's it. They hadn't laid a brick yet, it was still just jungle. A great chance to get in on a big development from square one. Glossy brochures. Hell, I've got one of them here someplace."

He pulled open a drawer under the coffee table and took out a colorful booklet, handing it over to Friendly. Its bright cover showed an artist's rendering of a large condominium apartment building framed in the happy green of palm trees, generous patios, and balconies overlooking a square mile of upscale boutiques and restaurants, a beach, and in the distance a sun three times normal size sinking into an ocean busy with yachts and cruise ships. An idyllic scene.

"So what was the deal?" Friendly asked.

"Straightforward enough. They were raising venture capital. Ten million dollars. Enough to pay for the land, pour the foundation—generally kick the project off. Pre-selling the condos would bring in the real money, a twenty to thirty percent return. I bought a six percent share. All the money I had. To raise it I had to put up my men's tie shops as collateral."

"You had a men's tie business?"

"That's right. Five shops. One of them at the airport, a little gold mine." He shrugged as if that were ancient history. "Anyway, it all fell through."

"How did that happen?"

"The government—the Barbados government—put the kibosh on it. What it was, that part of the island happens to be a place where giant sea turtles come to mate or die or hang out or something. They're protected by international law, apparently. Mess with a turtle and you got Desert Storm at your door."

"And the seed money was spent."

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Every nickel. The land, paid for initially with a business loan, got seized by the government, but the loan had to be repaid. And there were fines. A lot of fines. The consortium—meaning us, the owners—had broken their new green laws. Never mind that we didn't know about those laws, we *should* have known, that was the thrust of it." He shrugged. "The money went fast, buying our way out of contracts, paying everybody off. That's all there is to it. That's how you got my piano."

"And you received a balance sheet of what sums were paid and to whom?"

"Not yet—but I will. There's to be an accounting sent out to all of us once the dust has settled."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Sure."

"How do you know it?"

"Reanne told me."

Friendly sat for a minute feeling sorry for E. Manfred Perryman. He was always surprised at how naive even the hardest-nosed businessmen could be under the influence of infatuation. The way Perryman still saw it, the loss was all on the

level. The big investors with their deep pockets could take the strain; guys like Perryman could not.

"You haven't gone after this guy who gave you—gave Ms. Norwick—the tip?"

"What good would that do? There was risk involved, I knew that going in. The bigger the risk, the bigger the profits—or the loss."

It all made sense the way Perryman told it. But one thing bothered Friendly—the girl, Ms. Norwick, being the intermediary, the channel through which all information flowed. Perryman wasn't kidding when he said he had trusted her. And apparently he still did. He seemingly relied completely on her endorsement of her former employer.

"Let me just make sure I understand this," Friendly said, resettling his considerable weight in the big leather chair. "After you raised investment funds against the equity in your business, the cash was paid over to whom?"

"To the consortium, who else?"

"And you received positive reports on this investment group from your financial advisors?"

Perryman looked uncomfortable, as if the question were deeply personal. "I didn't ask for any."

"Because Ms. Norwick was sold on the deal?"

"That's right." He shrugged. "I've already said I made a terrible mistake."

"One more thing. What is this Otis guy to her? He acts like a body-guard."

"He's her ex. They were serious once. They're back together again."

They couldn't stay away from each other. It must be love."

"And how do you know all this?"

Friendly could answer that one himself: Ms. Norwick!

Norwick and Otis Weeks came out of the bedroom. The redhead rummaged in the front hall for a plastic bag, then took it back along the hall to fill it up with things. Weeks sat back down at the piano and resumed diddling with it.

"I asked you not to do that," Friendly said.

The tall awkward guy put his hands in his lap and grinned.

"You mind if I use your balcony?" Friendly asked, rising to his feet and looking at Perryman.

"Not at all. You can spend the day there if you like."

Friendly pulled the sliding door shut behind him, dialed his cell phone, and waited. It wasn't the best day to appreciate the view—bitter cold with long gray clouds dragging across the sky—but he could see it was first-rate: the harbor, the two bridges, the city skyline across the water. Even better at night all lit up, Friendly decided. But in the summer. Already he was feeling the chill. He couldn't stay out here long.

The call went through, and he started to talk.

When Friendly stepped back in to the apartment again, the redhead and Perryman were arguing, and Otis Weeks was plinking on the piano again. More accurately, Ms. Norwick was doing the arguing while Perryman stood listening and holding his drink in front of him and staring into it.

"... you know I'm broke, so you're crazy if you think I'll walk away from all this stuff," Ms. Norwick was telling him, "and you know what they say, possession is nine-tenths of the law."

"Nine points," put in Friendly.

"You do what you like," said the redhead to E. Manfred Perryman, giving up on him, "but this is my stuff, too, and I'm keeping it."

"Except for the piano," Friendly reminded her.

The redhead stopped berating Perryman, swung around, and fixed Friendly in her sights. "I thought I'd made that clear to you! I don't know who you are or who you think you are, but I'm taking that piano!"

As if to drive her point home, Otis Weeks struck an especially loud plink on one key of the Steinway.

Wilson Friendly decided he'd had enough. He drifted across the floor and slammed the keyboard shut on the offending hand. Otis Weeks screamed and yanked his hand away, rearing back so abruptly he tipped the bench over and fell on his back. His gun tumbled free, and Friendly scooped it up and pocketed it. Weeks came up fast, a typical brawler, grabbing for Friendly's throat with his good hand, but as big as his hand was, large-veined and muscled, it couldn't begin to encompass Friendly's neck. Friendly slapped him, saw the fight go out of him, and gathered him in, folding up the long, lanky, panting, tough guy. He frog-marched him to the balcony door and shoved him through it, slamming the door shut and latching it. Mr. Weeks wouldn't



be going anywhere unless he was a high-steel man or a veteran mountain climber.

Friendly turned back to confront the others, both Perryman and the redhead gaping at him in astonishment. The redhead found her voice first. "And just what the hell do you think you're up to?"

"Let's you and me go in the bedroom," Friendly said.

"What?"

He took her arm. "You and me."

"Do something, Manfred!" she hollered.

Perryman shook his head and retreated toward the bar. "Not me. I know how he gets. I've got the bruised ribs to prove it."

The redhead fought him, swinging wildly. Keeping her at arm's length and hoisting her up so she had to walk tall on her toes, he led her into the bedroom and nudged the door shut with his heel. The bed was enormous; a quality item. Sitting the girl on it and keeping his grip on her, Friendly said, "Settle down. I want you to listen to me."

"Listen to *you*? Why should I listen to *you*? Why—"

"It's over."

She calmed down fast as if she sensed what was coming.

"What's over?"

"The whole ball of wax. Your swindle of Manfred, this charade about the furniture. Everything."

"What the hell are you talking about?" She had to ask. It was like a script.

"You know what I'm talking about." He had to say that, too. "You don't have any ex-boss in Carib-

bean real estate. There is no seniors' complex. The deal didn't fall through because there never was one. You and Weeks set this whole thing up, and it's not the first time. You've done it before." He was guessing at some of it, but she didn't deny anything.

He released his grip on her, and she got up slowly, quiet now but with a lot going on behind the hazel eyes. Turning away from him she began to study herself in the cheval glass.

"How do you know all this?"

"I found out your priors. Unlike Mr. Perryman, I know who to ask."

"And what are you going to do about it? Call the cops?"

"I have two options for you. That's one of them."

"And the other?"

"Give the money back."

"You're insane."

"I don't see that. Unless you've spent it already. Six percent of ten million is six hundred thousand. How much is still left?"

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"You don't have to. I'm not the police. You can tell them all about it if you'd rather."

She sagged, hands splayed out on the bureau, supporting her. Then she walked around to the other side of the bed and wandered back again. She was a thinker. Smart. She had to know that her hand was dead.

"All right, the money hasn't been touched yet. It was deposited in an off-shore account. Unnumbered. Cayman Islands." She turned around, some of the fire jumping

back into her. "That's all I'm saying until you tell me the terms of this so-called option!"

"Do you know what a wire transfer is?" Friendly asked.

They came out of the bedroom together, Ms. Norwick a step ahead. Otis Weeks was beating weakly on the sliding door with his left hand, a despairing look on his hollow face. He looked blue. The redhead hurried across the room and let him in, steering him off to the side and calming him while whispering the bad news into his ear. He kept a murderous glare fixed on Friendly.

Friendly sat down next to Perryman. E. Manfred was now firmly under the influence of several generous scotches. "So," he said carelessly to Friendly, "what was all that about?"

Friendly handed him his cell. "Check your bank balance."

"Why?"

"Just check it."

Perryman dialed the phone, waited, punched in a pin number. He

had to do the pin number twice, screwing up the first time. He listened with his watery eyes blinking, then slowly handed back the phone. "I don't get it. Should I bother to ask?"

"What did you find out?"

"The money is back. I can't draw on it yet, it hasn't cleared, but it's back."

Friendly put the phone away. "Fine." He turned to the redhead, who was huddling near the door with Otis, and gave her a nod. They went out together, looking back at him with a seething mix of hatred and bewilderment in their eyes.

Perryman tried his own phone next, as if Friendly's cell might have been set up to trick him. He must have got the same answer because he seemed to grow a little taller, coming back across the floor.

"What do you want?" Perryman asked hoarsely. "Anything, and you got it."

"What I'd like," said Friendly, "is to sell a piano . . ."

# A LITTLE MUSIC, A LITTLE LAUGHTER



Dan Crawford

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**P**olijn glanced up. Here it came. She looked at the squire and struck an opening chord.

“We’ll sing not of wind nor of weather-borne chills;  
We have what we need here to cure all our ills.”

Some of them saw the huge punchbowl being brought forward by six men, and others merely recognized the song. But everyone roared approval and cried out with equal spontaneity (and lack of tune) the words of the next verse:

“Here’s to the apple, red fruit of the tree:  
Bringing summer to all when the winds whistle free!”

There were enough guests stamping their feet in approval to raise a cloud of dust from the floorboards. Polijn held her breath. They would do this for every verse; she couldn’t afford to start inhaling the cloud. There would be a verse for every lantik ingredient in the punchbowl, and they threw well-nigh everything into their recipe in these parts. It would make for a lo-o-ong party.

“Here’s to the cinnamon: brown stick of fire;  
Good heart to all here and good voice to the choir!”

Virtually the entire village was gathered in the inn’s common room, old folks, young folks, courting couples kissing in every corner, babies being nursed left and right. The squire’s whole family had come down from the big house, the squire carrying a large shield on which was painted a beer mug. Later in the evening he would star in a little Winter Festival playlet he had written himself, a frigid adventure that began, “Dragons sitting on the ice might strike you as a minor vice.”

“Pears we must have, or we’ll not drink a drop!  
Tell us we have pears or our singing will stop.”

A hundred voices bellowed to the singers that the bowl being painstakingly lowered onto the vast table did indeed include pears. Polijn believed it.

She found it hard to believe there would be a scrap of food left in the entire county after tonight. Anything that could not readily be mixed into the punch sat out on the broad boards: smoked fish and fowl, great wheels of cheese, a joint of meat as large as she was surrounded by heaps of sausages and roasted potatoes, stewed vegetables, mountains of bread, and trays of tarts. Punctuating the array were what seemed to be hundreds of small pots of a horseradish sauce she could swear was

making her eyes water from here. Or perhaps it was simply the sight of so much food.

"Here's to the brandy, that clear liquid doom.  
Pray say there's enough for each one in the room!"

The chorus roared again in reply to the minstrels. A dozen professional singers had turned up at the Field of Agates in time for this festival. The innkeeper had been glad to see them all and had promised each of them a few pennies and their fill of food and drink. This was good enough as far as it went, but the Field of Agates was not a big enough inn to offer sleeping accommodations to twelve nonpaying guests. Only Rastan and Terada had been invited to stay through the full three days. The others, including Polijn, would either have to pay for a room or make other arrangements.

"Here's to the wine which will keep us all warm:  
We'll not fear the snow, and we'll not dread the storm."

That was a lie so far as Polijn was concerned. The snow was deep and the wind bitter cold tonight. The sky was as dark as water under the ice. Of course that was one of the great reasons for holding these winter festivals: the sun might seem to be dying, but as long as everyone here was lively, there would likely be another spring.

Polijn studied the vibrant assembly. She didn't have enough hard currency to pay for a room; she had to find someone who would give hospitality to a singer for some other reason. As the only woman among the assembled minstrels, she knew her best chance was with some bachelor who had not made other plans. At other times of the year this would have been less of a challenge, but families tended to pull together for this festival, and outsiders, brought in for whatever uses, were frowned on. So what she had to find was a bachelor without family obligations.

There weren't many of those. Civic authorities frowned on unattached citizens. To her knowledge, only the tanner fit the bill, and one of the barmaids had him half spoken for. But the barmaid had somewhere else she could sleep tonight. Polijn felt she'd be justified in cutting the older woman out. *If*, that was, she could aim no higher than a man whose bedroom was above the shop where he worked leather aged in goat's urine.

"Here's to the ginger, that fierce heating spice:  
Mix it in well, and fill my cup twice."

Alternately, she could roam the village until she found a yard with a shed and no dog to guard it. From what she'd seen of it so far, this town

was well locked up. This close to the river you had to be prepared for human flotsam drifting through. In fact there was nothing between the inn and the river but snow and stones. The Field of Agates was named for the vast quantity of striped, polished stones to be found along the waterfront. Of course, that meant that even if Polijn were inclined to dig under the snow for some, they wouldn't buy her a thing around here.

"Here's to the nutmeg and its brother, mace,  
For now is the time, and here is the place."

The squire was roaring along, too. Mergamesh was a big man, a grandfather with an enormous family and an enormous fortified house to keep them in. And, Polijn supposed, a few empty rooms somewhere. Competition among the minstrels who had not already arranged to stay at the Field of Agates would be fierce. It was certainly keeping everyone in tune so far. Word was, though, that the competition was all but decided. Three of the men singing about the punch had stayed every midwinter at the squire's home and would likely be chosen again.

Still, maybe one of *them* would like company. Polijn looked them over.

"Here's to the cherries, the cherries so sweet:  
Bring roses to cheeks and a dance to our feet!"

Then in the front door walked a stranger, a stranger with funereal eyes. He was a gaunt, bleak soul, his face as pinched and cold as the wind. From the looks people gave him as they parted to let him pass, they didn't know who he was and were rather glad of it.

The chorus dwindled as he proceeded toward the center of the room. The squire was pushing up to confront him when he turned around and roared at the company, "More revelry! Revelry wherever I go!"

"You must be a popular fellow, stranger," replied the squire, his voice as thunderous as the other man's.

The man turned on him, and angry as he was, the squire took a step back. "What is the purpose of this unhallowed revelry?" the man demanded. "Revelry wholly unconnected with the true spirit of the holiday?"

"Well, if it's holy unconnected, it can't be altogether unhallowed, can it?" the squire told him. "Sit down and have a drink."

"Drinking! Singing!" The stranger strode around the circle of onlookers. "Is that what you're here for? No!"

One thick arm swept down; mugs and plates spun to the floor. A few men, naturally irritated, started to rise, but his eyes froze them and, after a moment they settled into their seats again.

"Here now!" snapped the squire, going after him. The stranger took a quick right and dashed a lute and a small harp from the hands of the



minstrels next to Polijn. Clutching her flute, Polijn pulled back, but the stranger spun toward the center of the room again, bypassing her.

"You are here to observe a sacred tradition!" he roared. "You are here to observe the ceremonies that keep the midwinter trolls at bay! When you lose sight of this purpose, you will all die frozen and forgotten!"

"But we've done it this way for years!" protested someone in the crowd. "And we're not . . ."

"What are you here to do?" the stranger demanded. "Honor yourselves and your families for the years you've drunk punch? Or observe the ceremonies and serve the true purpose of the holiday?"

"Well, myself," said the squire, coming up next to him, "I refuse to have a holiday that's so paltry as to have only one purpose. If you don't like the way we have our holidays, with our friends and our families and our punch and our presents, you're free to keep your ceremonies someplace else."

A heavy hand fell on the stranger's shoulder, but it was a mighty big shoulder and the stranger didn't seem to notice the hand. "And does everyone here agree to that?" he demanded. "That your punch and your pretty-pretties are more important than holding off the frozen breath of the trolls?"

There was muttering in the crowd, some of it for the stranger. Polijn had heard this argument before in other places and on assorted holidays. It could go on for hours, it could lead to invitations to step outside and settle it with fists, and there wasn't a penny to be made from it. Somebody was going to have to be the early frost that kept this weed from growing.

She raised her flute to her lips and blew a piercing trill. One or two guests released cries of joyful relief. Without waiting for others Polijn lowered her instrument and started in on the first verse. The stranger could not possibly object, though he did wince, for it was the tale of King Birulph and the Troll in the Snow. A holiday song of great age, the events it dealt with, when Birulph supposedly faced down three of his own soldiers, knowing one of them was a troll in disguise, were fourteen centuries a-gone.

The squire stood back a bit, tapping a foot but keeping one eye on the stranger. The stranger himself seemed willing to bide his time. The song was long, but it was bound to have an end. Each of the two men waited to use it in his side of the argument about the uses and abuses of the day.

The rest of the crowd simply waited for their cue. At the pivotal moment, before the dangerous stroke of midnight, Birulph had tricked each of the three men into saying "holy holiday," a phrase no troll could speak. It had become the tradition for the crowd to roar along on the catchphrase. Stranger and squire were forgotten as the vital question approached.

The other minstrels had joined the song, catching on to Polijn's strategy, and every performer called in unison, "What did he say?"

"Holy holiday!" shouted the audience, shaking dust from the ceiling.

They were stamping their feet as the second suspect was questioned. The minstrels shouted, "What did he say?"

"Holy holiday!" shrieked the crowd.

Polijn swung her flute out in a signal to the other minstrels and repeated "What did he say?"

"Holy holiday!" the crowd replied, even louder than the first two times.

She pointed at them. "Men with beards!"

The men called back, "Holy holiday!"

The flute came around. "Women older than they look!"

This time a few guffaws merged with the "Holy holiday!"

"Men standing up!" she shouted.

"Holy holiday!"

She set her hands on her hips. "I didn't hear you!"

"Holy holiday!"

Aside from minstrels, there were only two men standing up. Polijn swung toward one of them. "I didn't hear *you* at all!"

The stranger glared at her. She took a step forward, her flute gleaming bright silver under all the candles. A few people laughed. Others turned to look the stranger over. He opened his mouth.

"Hopper . . . bah!"

Screams replaced the chorus as the gaunt stranger shivered and then tightened into a pillar of white. Bright blue eyes and long blue teeth were the only interruptions in the column that now stood twice as tall as had the stranger.

"Bah!" he said again, his voice now even more like thunder. "You cannot keep us out forever! Call our friends!"

From nowhere in particular a new chorus rose, a hollow, windy chorus that involved nothing so warm as a human throat. People looked around for its source and then screamed again as little black pyramids rose from the floor.

"Field of Agates!" growled the icy troll. "Once this unhallowed ground was known as the Field of Faggots for the fires that burned here, burning at one time a hundred witches!" Cold white arms rose. "Come up, ancient dead! Bring horror on the posterity of your murderers!"

The ash rose into dark gray columns. A few people rushed for the door, opened it, and recoiled in horror at what they saw there. Polijn could not see what they were seeing, but the spectacle of a hundred witches slowly unburning before her was plenty enough to look at. The ash became writhing human forms, and then those forms stopped writhing and simply looked around the big silent room. The troll laughed.

"What—" One tall man whose forehead and scalp showed that he had resisted arrest. "What am I doing here?"

"I was dead, wasn't I?" demanded an elderly woman at his side.

"Avenge your deaths!" bellowed the troll.

The formerly dead people continued to look around the room, exactly as if their recent resurrection had damaged both understanding and hearing. Suddenly a boy hardly taller than Polijn pointed up at the ceiling.

"Those are Midwinter decorations!"

"But I was dead," complained the elderly woman. "I was resting. Why didn't they leave us resting?"

A short woman started to shriek but clapped a hand over her mouth. Her eyes rolled wildly left and right and then fell on Polijn.

"Is . . ." She swallowed hard. "Is that Midwinter Punch?" She pointed at the huge bowl.

"Yes," said Polijn.

"Avenge—" the troll began.

"I thought I'd never . . ." The woman swallowed again. "Did you sing the song?"

Polijn was opening her mouth to reply, but the short woman didn't wait. Dark hair flew as the head tipped back and the former pile of ash sang:

"Here's to the cloves: pile them on, heap them in;  
Good health to the host and good health to his kin!"

"Ha!" The squire strode up to the pillar of ice, which seemed to be growing taller. "You see? The punch and the holiday are alike mixes. You can't make them simple!"

"Bah!" The icy arms swung around the squire and grasped each other, drawing the host hard against the essence of winter.

"Quick!" Polijn grabbed the two minstrels nearest her and headed for the punchbowl. She found the tall dead man with the scarred forehead and the boy following her. Together they took hold of the huge bowl and rushed forward.

"Eetch!" gasped the squire as he began to freeze.

"Eeeeeeee!" wailed the troll as the contents of the punchbowl—those that had been sung and those that had not—cascaded across his icy form. Outside whatever was waiting wailed as well. A moment later there was nothing left of the troll but a tiny heap of ash and the aroma of burnt pork.

"Holy holiday!" called the tall man, saluting Polijn as he vanished.

"Holy holiday!" shouted the other witches as they disappeared. The onlookers called back, "Holy holiday!"

The squire fell back into a chair. "Hoopf!" he said. His eyes went

around to the company. "Well, are we having a Midwinter feast or not? Bring in the spare bowl of punch!"

Come morning, a squire with a throbbing head came in search of any ear that would offer a sympathetic hearing. He found Polijn's.

"In m'heart," he told her, drawing himself a mug of beer, "meant every word I said." He shrugged some kinks out of the muscles in his shoulders. "In m'head, though, I'm glad we don't have to do it but once a year."

Polijn, who had been awarded a room of honor next to the nursery, where the squire's grandchildren had kept up a whooping game of Trolls and Princes all night long, nodded weary but complete agreement.

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# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Vasily Titov / Trip / Viesti Collection*

Clearly a branch line, not a trunk line. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the July-August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

## FICTION



*Illustration by Linda Weatherly*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01*

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I did not meet the Eighth Earl of Rolingbroke until he was twelve years old. I was in some measure compensated for the lack of our acquaintance during those first dozen years of his life, not only by the deep friendship my stepbrother and I formed over the years we did have together, but also by occasionally being allowed to spend time with him after his death.

His death had come unexpectedly and before he attained his thirtieth year. That first evening after his funeral I sat before the fire in the Abbey library, weary and yet certain that my grief for him would not allow me to sleep. Not many hours earlier my late stepbrother had been laid to rest in the family crypt. Lucien's body was placed next to that of his wife—who had died five years before, shortly after giving birth to Charles, their only child.

Lucien's orphaned son was much on my mind. Candle in hand, I had looked in on Charles just before ten o'clock that night. The day's events had been exhausting for him as well, and he slept, though his young face seemed sad even in repose. He stirred, perhaps because of the light, so I extinguished it. I waited, but he did not waken, and I crept silently away in the darkness, softly shutting his door before relighting the candle. I returned to the library.

I poured another glass of port as the mantel clock struck eleven. I had dismissed the servants for the evening, not able to bear their solicitude or their misery. They had loved Lucien as much as I, and the strain of this terrible day was tell-

ing on us all. I chose to spend the last few hours of it alone, thinking of Lucien and the years we had shared as brothers. How I would miss him!

When Lucien's father married my widowed mother, my mother and I went to live at The Abbey. I'd met the Seventh Earl of Rolingbroke, my new stepfather, on only two previous occasions—brief interviews that had put me quite in awe of that forceful man. I entered his home knowing I was without a champion—my mother, for all her beauty and good-heartedness, was a timid soul, more likely to suffer a fit of the vapors than to defend me.

The Abbey itself was daunting—a rambling structure larger by far than the small estate where I had been reared, and very much older. I sincerely believed that a boy of my size might be lost within it, and even if his newly remarried mother should take the trouble to look for him, she might never discover which winding staircase or long gallery held his remains.

Not the least of my anxieties concerned my new stepbrother. I expected resentment from Lucien, then twelve and two years my senior. My first impression of him led me to believe that he was a cool and distant fellow. As we entered The Abbey, he stood back from the others, regarding me lazily from his greater height. I was afraid and trying not to show it—but I must have failed, for his father muttered something about "Master Quakeboots."

Lucien's expression changed



then, and he welcomed me by bowing and murmuring for my ears only, "Lord Shivershanks, at your service." I choked back a laugh, received his rare but charming smile in return, and, like any recipient of that smile, knew all would be right with the world.

Lucien soon became both friend and brother, offering wise-beyond-his-years guidance and his seldom bestowed affection. He taught me how to get on well with my stepfather, protected me against a bully or two, and allowed me to accompany him in every lark imaginable. He taught me the ways and traditions of The Abbey. He also taught me how to find several secret passages within it and told me stories of its past, thrilling me with tales of ghostly, headless monks haunting the north (and only remaining) tower, of hidden treasures and ancient curses.

"And we must not forget the Christmas Curse," he whispered to me one chilly evening in late November—when as usual he had made use of a priest's hole to come into my room and visit long after the servants believed him abed.

"Can there be such a thing?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he said with one of his mischievous smiles. "You, my dear Edward, have not had the felicity of meeting my Aunt and Uncle Bane and their pack of hellborn brats—Henry, William, and Fanny. Utter thatchgallows."

"Thatchgallows!" I laughed.

"Shhh! Yes. Born to be hanged, every man Jack of them—and Fanny, too. We shall have to prepare

for their arrival. They'll try to harass you, of course, but don't worry. Every time one of them behaves odiously, you are to remind yourself that soon we will be handing them a reckoning."

He was not mistaken. Lord and Lady Bane brought their three interesting offspring to The Abbey not two weeks later. The servants had prepared for their visit by carefully removing the most treasured and fragile objects of the household from sight. From the moment the Banes passed through the imposing entrance of The Abbey, our home was turned upside down. Henry and William, true to Lucien's prediction, made it their business to make me suffer. Henry was my own age, William a year younger, but they were both taller and stronger than I. All three children favored their father, Lord Alfred Bane, who was both brother-in-law and cousin to the earl—though I could perceive no family resemblance. Lord Bane was a redhaired man whose countenance could easily be brought to match it in color. His softest whisper was nothing less than a shout—and he seldom whispered.

His sons were equally loud and seemed never to stand still for a moment. They contrived to poke, pinch, trip, and jostle me at every opportunity. By the end of their second day among us, I was quite bruised but did not doubt for a moment that Lucien would come to my aid. In his quiet way he often did so, surprisingly able to control them as no one else could—giving a quelling look to Henry or William



that always made them desist until they chanced to find me apart from him.

When those opportunities arose, any feeble attempt on my part to defend myself caused them to set up a caterwauling that served as a siren call to Lady Sophia Bane. This fond mother relished coming to their aid and invariably boxed my ears as she rang a peal over my head. On these occasions my own mother, who knew better than any general how to retreat in good order, always announced that she felt a spasm coming on, and—clutching her vinaigrette to her bosom—excused herself from the battlefield.

Lady Bane complained constantly, perceiving faults everywhere. The food was not to her liking. The servants were never to be found when needed. The room in which she sat was too chilly. When the fires were made larger, she was too warm and protested that the chimneys smoked. The rooms where they had been installed were uncomfortable for this reason or that. "Not what we are accustomed to at Bane House!" was a refrain we soon wearied of hearing.

When she declared that their rooms were inconveniently located, my stepfather raised his brows.

"But my dear Sophia!" he said. "They are the very rooms you insisted upon after refusing the ones you had last year, claiming I was trying to banish you to a far wing of The Abbey."

It made no difference.

Lucien later told me that his father and aunt had been reared separately—the earl had spent most of

his childhood at The Abbey with Lucien's grandfather. Lucien's grandmother, who disliked life in the country nearly as much as she disliked her husband, lived in Town with her daughter, Sophia.

I was grateful for these insights. We had little opportunity for private speech such as this, however, for Fanny constantly spied on Lucien and me. Since I had been almost constantly in his company during the previous months, suddenly being unable to share confidences with Lucien gave me a sense of loneliness the depth of which surprised me, as I had often been alone before we came to live at The Abbey.

Then one evening, just as I was feeling quite sure this would be my most miserable Christmas ever, Lucien winked and smiled at me. I immediately understood this to mean that he had devised a remedy for our troubles. I was not mistaken.

We had been engaged in playing jackstraws, but Fanny's governess, who had been overseeing our activities that evening, called the proceedings to a halt—perceiving, I suppose, that this was not the sort of game the Banes could play without violence. As she moved across the room to put the game away, Lucien turned to me and said, "Edward, do you suppose the ghost will walk tonight?"

"What ghost?" the Banes said loudly and in unison.

"The Headless Abbot, of course," he replied.

Fanny's eyes grew round.

"What nonsense is this?" asked



the governess, but with an air of interest.

"Long, long ago," Lucien said, casting his spell over us, "a castle was built here—its ruins form part of the north tower. But the castle itself was built over ruins—ruins of an even older abbey, which is how our home came to be named.

"In the days when The Abbey was truly an abbey, a war broke out between two powerful lords. One winter's night, not long before Christmas, the abbey came under attack, which was a shocking thing because this was then considered a holy place, with relics and the like. Knights in armor rode their horses into the chapel, where the abbot was leading the evening prayer. The captain of these rogues took out his broadsword and—*swoosh!*" He made a slicing motion with his hand.

All three Banes and the governess gasped—and I believe I did, too, for though I had heard this tale before, never had Lucien related it in such a dramatic manner.

"Yes," Lucien said darkly, "he beheaded the holy man where he stood, and his knights murdered all the other monks—defenseless men at their prayers."

This earned another gasp.

"But why did they do such a thing?" the horrified governess asked.

Lucien seemed to hesitate, in manner that of one who was deciding whether he should impart a great secret. "The attackers," he finally said, "had heard a legend, a tale of a treasure kept in the abbey. It probably wasn't true, for al-

though they examined every cupboard and cabinet and pulled at loose stones and tiles and looked in every room and hall for its hiding place, they could not find the treasure." He paused. "The powerful lord to whom the knight had sworn his loyalty sent a messenger to the captain, saying that he needed his warriors and so they must make all haste to the battlefield. The greedy captain did not want to abandon his treasure hunt, so he pretended to have an illness. He sent all but a small number of the knights to join their lord in battle while he remained with a small band—the most black-hearted of the lot—to continue his search."

He lowered his voice. "But during the night on the very first evening this small company stayed in the abbey, the men who stood guard were startled to see a strange sight—a man wearing a monk's robes, his face hidden by its cowl, seemed to appear out of nowhere. Unlike the brown-robed monks they had slaughtered so mercilessly, this one was dressed all in white save for a splash of red on his chest. 'Who goes there?' cried one of the knights. The figure in white halted and lowered his cowl. With horror the knights saw that the apparition *had no head.*"

"The abbot!" William said breathlessly.

"Yes," Lucien said. "The guards screamed in terror, awakening the others. The knights were frightened, but their captain tried to brazen it out. 'Show us your treasure!' he shouted. And the abbot began to lead the way. The captain called to



his five bravest men, and they followed the monk into a secret passage. The others were too frightened to go near him and waited."

Again Lucien paused.

"Yes, yes! Then what happened?" Henry insisted.

Lucien smiled. "They were never seen again!"

There was a suitably awed silence.

"But the treasure!" William said. "What happened to the treasure?"

"It was never found. Accidents befell any who tried to discover it—especially those who ventured near the old sanctuary. Eventually this land was given to one of our ancestors. He had the portion of the abbey that had been the sanctuary sealed off and built his castle over it. But the local people will tell you that the Headless Abbot still walks on winter nights. Some say they've heard the sound of hoofbeats coming from the part of the abbey that lies nearest the sanctuary—the ghostly horses of the accursed knights."

"Which part of this old pile is that?" Henry asked, trying for nonchalance.

Lucien appeared to reflect. "Why, I believe it is very near your rooms."

All Henry's bravado disappeared. "Mother!" he screamed, running from the room. Fanny burst into tears and soon followed him. William hurriedly escaped on her heels.

"My word!" the governess said, rather pale, although perhaps she feared her employer's displeasure more than headless monks, for she hastened after her charges.

"My compliments," said Lucien calmly. "You appeared suitably frightened. If you continue to play your part so well, my dear Edward, I believe we can have them on their way by first light."

I decided not to admit that I was genuinely frightened, but I think he knew in any case, for the delightful prospect of the Banes' departure made me smile, and when he saw it, he said, "That's the barber! They've been beastly nuisances to me, but worse to you, poor boy." He looked closely at my face, which had served as a target for Henry's fists a little earlier in the day. "Dare say you'll have a mouse under your right eye. Was it Henry who tried to darken your daylight?"

I nodded, fairly certain that Henry had indeed given me a black eye.

"Nasty fellow, Henry. I'll have to think of some special treat for him. But never mind that—you've got more bottom than the lot of them. Game as a pebble, you are!"

Such praise, delivered for the most part in cant expressions he had learned from one of the stable lads, delighted me so much he had to remind me to appear to be frightened.

"We must be prepared, for my father will be demanding an explanation of us soon, I'm sure."

The thought of being called before the earl was enough to restore my pallor.

"Excellent," Lucien said, his smile broadening when Fibbens appeared at the door.

"If your lordship and Master Edward would be so good as to come with me?" the young footman



said, his face revealing nothing. "Your lordship's father asks that you join the other members of the family in the drawing room."

"To receive a rare trimming from my Aunt Sophia?" Lucien asked.

There was the slightest twitch at the corner of Fibbens' mouth before he answered, "I'm sure I could not say, your lordship."

As we approached the drawing room, Lucien whispered to me, "It is absolutely essential, dear Edward, that you stand as close to my father as possible."

A daunting instruction indeed. Summoning all my courage, I did as he asked, making my way to the earl's side as Lady Bane began to deliver herself of what promised to be a lengthy speech on the lack of manners of certain members of the younger generation. Henry, William, and Fanny eyed us with smug satisfaction.

"Never mind that, Sophia!" Lord Bane interrupted, loud enough to cause my mother to shrink back against the cushions of the sofa she occupied but silencing—however briefly—his own wife.

No sooner had I taken up my position near the earl's chair than he stood, picking up a decanter and walking toward Lord Bane as though none of the havoc in the room were actually taking place. I looked to Lucien, who subtly signaled me to stay where I was.

"Lucien," the earl said quietly as he finished refilling Lord Bane's glass, "I don't suppose you would mind troubling yourself to give me a brief summary of the events of

this evening? I am particularly interested in those that caused your cousins to fly to their mama and hold to her skirts."

Lord Bane laughed at this, even as his wife protested. As my stepfather walked back toward me, he seemed to study me for a moment before refilling his own glass and returning the decanter to the drinks tray. "Edward," he said, in the gentlest voice I had yet heard him use, "come stand here with me by the fire. My sister tells me all our chimneys smoke, but I fear I'll need to feel some warmth while Lucien recites his chilling tale."

So we moved nearer the fireplace with its holly-draped mantel. The warmth of the fire felt good, and so did some nearly imperceptible change in my stepfather's manner toward me. Lucien began his tale, but the earl kept his eyes on me.

"As you have so often told us, Aunt Sophia," Lucien said, "you are a woman who is accustomed to finer treatment than we can afford you here at The Abbey, in part because you consider London your home and were not often here as a child. That being so, I do not imagine the tale of the Headless Abbot has come to your ears."

"I should say not!"

Lucien turned to his father. "I thought it only fair to warn my dear cousins about him, sir."

"Your dear cousins," the earl repeated. "Just so."

Lucien again recounted the legend, this telling no less unnerving than the previous one. My mother had recourse to her vinaigrette no





fewer than five times but was an avid listener.

"Poppycock!" Lord Bane declared. "Fairy tales."

"I used to think so," Lucien said. "But if it's just a fairy tale, there ought to be a good earl in it. But there isn't, you see."

"A good earl?" his father asked, looking sharply at him.

"Yes, Father. The abbey should have been protected by a good man, someone who cared about the defenseless men who lived there. He would not have let the ruffians who descended on them have their way."

"Perhaps he was otherwise occupied," the earl said.

Lucien shrugged. "Perhaps he did not see his duty."

The earl raised a brow. "Perhaps he was taking a switch to the backside of his impertinent son."

Lucien gave a little bow. "I trust in your wisdom, sir. You must have the right of it."

"Doing it much too brown, Lucien!" the earl said, but there was a twinkle in his eye that did not abate even as his sister upbraided him for using such terms.

"And why you talk of earls, which has nothing to do with the case, I'm sure I don't know!" Lady Bane protested. "You seem to forget, dear brother, that Lucien has frightened poor Fanny and her brothers half to death!"

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Sophia," Lucien said when she paused to draw breath, "if I've caused you or my cousins any fright. But I do think the experience of seeing the ghost or hearing the hoofbeats is much less frightening if one is pre-

pared. Imagine the shock one might feel if he were to see a blood-stained, headless apparition floating outside his window at midnight if he *didn't* know the legend."

"Nonsense!" Lady Bane declared. "We've spent Christmas here these past three years and more. Why have we never heard this legend before now?"

"If I may offer an explanation, Aunt Sophia?" Lucien said. "Only one section of The Abbey is haunted—beneath the chambers you occupy. No one is ever disturbed in any other part of the house, so we did not wish to frighten you with the tale. But since you wished to have the rooms nearest the north tower—"

"Oh! So this is my fault is it? Well, I'll tell you why we are just now hearing of your ghost, my good fellow! Because some who've never been here before this year have invented tales. Outsiders!" She rounded on me, pointing. "It's you!"

She received a chorus of approval from her offspring. I quailed before them, but then I felt the earl's large hand on my shoulder. I winced a bit as he touched a bruise, and his hand shifted slightly. At that moment I became aware that the room had fallen silent. Everyone was looking at the earl, whose face was a mask of cold fury.

"Are you assuming that my wife's son has no place in our family?" he asked icily. "I assure you, Sophia, he is not an outsider here. Lucien thinks of Edward as his brother, and I as my son. Indeed, there are blood relations I would much liefer disown—and may."



I could hardly believe my own ears, which were soon assaulted.

"No offense meant!" Lord Bane shouted. I was sure he'd spoken loudly enough to startle the villagers from their beds several miles away.

The earl, however, appeared not to have heard him. "Perhaps, Sophia, you would find Christmas in Town more to your liking."

"La!" she said nervously, "how you do take one up! Prefer Christmas in London to being with family—indeed, no! Bane is right—I meant no offense. Lucien's lurid tale has quite upset me!"

With that, she snapped at her children, telling them it was long past time for them to be abed, remonstrated with the governess for not having seen to it, and said, "Bane!" in a commanding tone that had her husband soon bidding all a good night.

"You too should be in bed, Edward," my mother said.

"Time we all were," my stepfather said. "Go on up if you like, my dear. I shall have a brief word with the boys before I retire."

As soon as she had left, the earl turned to Lucien and said in a lazy voice, "I trust Act III of your little drama will be staged later this evening?" Despite his tone I could see the amusement in his eyes, and for the first time, I perceived a likeness between the earl and his son that went beyond Lucien's physical resemblance to his father.

"Tomorrow evening, sir. Tonight would be too soon. They are Banes, and being such, need time to think."

"You frighten me far more than

your telling of the legend did—though I credit you with an admirable performance."

Lucien bowed again. "I had an excellent teacher."

The earl gave a sudden shout of laughter. "Impossible boy!"

"Again, sir—"

"No, don't say I taught you to be such an impudent hellion, for I'll swear I did not!"

"Then I shall say nothing, sir—except—except—thank you, sir!"

"'Tis the other way 'round, I believe." The earl turned back to me and gently lifted my chin. "I see I have been remiss in your education, Edward. Or perhaps—yes—Lucien, you must teach your brother to be handy with his fives." He paused. "Lady Rolingbroke need not be apprised of it."

"Thank you, sir!" I said.

"Oh, I demand a high price! If you fail to rid me of the Banes, you and that makebait Lucien will be served gruel for Christmas dinner—by whatever headless monk I can find to take it to the dungeon!"

We were destined to eat a sumptuous feast. Before Lucien and I sought our beds, he enlisted my aid in creating a few hoofbeats along the secret passages near each of the Banes' bedchambers. Henry had awakened to feel a ghostly presence in the form of a room that was suddenly terribly cold, not knowing that Lucien had merely left the entrance to one of the draftiest passages open for a time.

We left it at that. The next morning, of course, we denied hearing anything like hoofbeats. When



Henry swore he had felt the ghost but no other member of his family told a similar tale, Lucien grew thoughtful. "I wonder why he would single you out?"

This made Henry go very pale and ask again if no one else had felt a bit chilly last night.

No one had, of course. The earl went so far as to say he had rarely slept so well.

Lady Bane was perhaps made suspicious by this remark, for she gave her husband a speaking look and asked him to accompany her into the village. Henry was rather quiet that day, if a little jumpy. William, owing to the increased watchfulness of several footmen and others, did not have any chances to harm me that morning. He later confided to us that Lord and Lady Bane had found the villagers ready to repeat all the salient points of the legend and in many cases to enlarge upon it. After hearing something of this at luncheon, the earl strode up to Lucien and me as we were on our way to the stables. "Lucien, dear boy, I take it I am going to be generous to my tenants this Boxing Day?"

"Extremely, sir. But it should interest you to know that Aunt Sophia's dresser has told Bogsley that she doesn't expect the Banes to remain in this, er, 'accursed place' another day."

"Don't tell me you've enlisted my staid butler in your schemes? I'd think it beneath Bogsley's dignity."

Lucien seemed to ponder before answering. "Perhaps, Father, it would be best not to inquire too closely on some matters."

"Good God!" the earl declared and walked away seeming shaken.

The following night I helped again with hoofbeats, and later to make howling sounds as Lucien—and Fibbens—contrived to swing a headless "apparition" past their windows. Bogsley had recommended the village seamstress who made the monk. Each Bane caught no more than a fleeting glimpse of this phantom, but judging from the pandemonium, this glimpse was more effective than a full night's haunting. The Banes, looking haggard, were on the road to London before noon, swearing never to return to The Abbey.

The earl declared it the most delightful Christmas gift his son had ever bestowed upon him, causing my mother a great deal of puzzlement.

**A**s we grew older I learned how rare a gift I had received in Lucien's affection for me and saw how infrequently he troubled himself to form friendships. He nevertheless grew into a man who was invited everywhere. While his fortune, breeding, and rank might have guaranteed that in any case, there was a vast difference between the welcome Lucien was given by leading members of the *haut ton* and that afforded others. That I benefited from my connection to him is without doubt and was decried by Lord Henry Bane, Mr. William Bane, Miss Fanny Bane, and the Dowager Lady Sophia Bane, who made no less imposing a widow than a wife. Lucien's aunt might



complain all she liked about "persons who were no blood relation" enjoying "privileges above their station," but she found few who paid heed to her.

Our parents died together in a carriage accident when Lucien was but twenty-two. He succeeded to his father's dignities and two years later married well. His wife was a young beauty with a handsome dowry, although his own wealth prevented anyone from imagining him a fortune hunter. Lucien, unlike so many of our order, married for love.

I was myself by no means penniless, provided for both by my late stepfather and, having come into an inheritance, through my mother's family. Not long after Lucien's wedding, feeling restless, I used some of my own fortune to buy colors and left for the Peninsular War to see what I could do to hamper Boney's efforts in Portugal and Spain. Lucien and I exchanged letters, and although the mail was not always reliable, his correspondence made my soldier's life easier to bear. The letters made me long to be home, of course. Of all of these, the most heart-rending was the one in which he told me of both the death of his wife and the birth of his son.

It was not his way to be effusive—either in grief or in joy—but in this letter he wrote a litany of all the small pleasures he would miss—hearing the soft rustle of her skirts as she entered the library while he read, watching her blush at an endearment, listening to her sing softly to herself as she walked through The Abbey gardens, un-

aware that he was near—and I came to a new understanding of how deeply he had cared for her. Beyond that one letter he never wrote to me again of her, though across the great distance between us I could sense his sadness.

Gradually, over the next two years, I began to see that he had found a new source of joy as well. Letter after letter gave the latest news of Charles Edward Rolingbroke, my nephew and godson. Lucien clearly doted on his heir. I saved these letters as I had every letter before, reading them again and again.

I next saw Lucien when he approached my bed in a dismal London hospital. He looked for me there after Ciudad Rodrigo. He had seen my name among the lists of wounded and used his influence to discover what had become of me. I heard someone say, "Captain, you've a visitor." I opened my eyes, and there stood Lucien, looking ridiculously worried. Delirious with fever, nevertheless I recognized him—at least for a few moments, when he seemed to me some last vision granted to me before dying. I was too weak even to speak to him and remember nothing more than smiling foolishly at him. Nor do I remember being moved from that place and taken to Rolingbroke House, his fashionable London residence. The quality of my care improved immeasurably, and eventually the fever subsided.

Though at last I no longer burned alive with it, I was still weak and somewhat confused about my



change of circumstance. I knew I was in Lucien's home and fell asleep not long after a recollection came to me of Lucien arguing with a doctor, refusing to allow me to be bled. This was confirmed by the doctor when I awoke the next morning. He chuckled. "No, wouldn't let me bleed you, and offered to—how did he put it now? Oh yes, he promised to draw my own claret if I caused you to lose one more drop of yours. Well, my fine captain, I'd as soon fight Boney himself than cross swords with the earl." My wounds, he told me, would leave me with a few scars and a permanent limp. "But only two days ago I tried to convince his lordship that your funeral service should be arranged, so you are in far better case than expected."

Not much later Lucien himself came into my room, under strict orders not to make his visit a long one. I told him I did not want to burden him with the care of a lame stepbrother who was weak as a cat and not of as much use.

"I shall fetch that doctor back," Lucien said, "and demand a return of his fee. He distinctly told me you were no longer delirious, but here you are, speaking utter nonsense!"

"Lucien—"

"No, wait! Tell me you aren't feverish, for I'm only allowed a short visit and I shall be driven mad by your nephew if he isn't allowed to at last lay eyes on his Uncle Edward."

"He's here?" I asked.

But my question was answered by the entrance of a small boy who, over his nursemaid's protests, opened the door and ran toward

his father. He was the spit and image of Lucien. "Papa!"

"Your lordship," the flustered nurse said, "I beg your pardon! I'll take him right out again."

"Oh no, madam!" Lucien exclaimed in mock horror. "Leave him with me. My brother has seen enough warfare as it is."

She left us, and no sooner had the door closed than Charles's questions began.

Did I feel better? Yes.

Had I hurt my head? Yes, that was why I wore a bandage.

Had I hurt my leg, then, too? Yes.

Did a Frenchy hurt me? Yes.

He offered to send his father to hurt the Frenchy in return. I thanked him but said I would prefer we all just stayed home together for a time, for I had missed my brother, and would like to become acquainted with his son.

Why was my skin so brown? A soldier spends a great deal of time in the sun.

"That will do, Master Pokenose," Lucien said, causing his son to giggle. Obediently, though, Charles ceased asking questions. He sat quietly while Lucien discussed plans for removing to the countryside. Quite against my will I began to fall asleep. Charles brought this to his father's attention, which brought a rich laugh from Lucien. "Indeed, youngster, you are right. We'll let him rest for now."

I murmured an apology, stirring awake as I felt a small hand take my own.

"Papa says you're a great gun and we must help you to get better."

"My recovery is assured, then," I



said, "but it is your papa who is the great gun."

Over the next three years, I would come to believe more and more in the truth of that statement. Fibbens was made my valet, a job that for some months involved the added duties of attending an invalid. I came to value him greatly. As my physical strength returned, though, it was Lucien and his son who would not allow me to retreat from the world. Charles's energetic encouragement and Lucien's refusal to permit me to mope over my injuries kept me from falling into a fit of the dismal. Before long I seldom thought so much of what I could not do as of what I could. Charles continued to delight me—I could not have been more attached to him if he had been my own boy.

On the night following Lucien's funeral, recalling my brother's life, I wondered how I would be able to comfort Charles over the days to come when the numbness I felt now would undoubtedly wear off.

When Lucien's horse, Fine Lad, had returned riderless to the stable three days earlier, a large group of men began a frantic search—servants, tenants, and neighbors. It was I who found him. I'd followed a route he often took through the woods when he rode for pleasure and discovered his motionless form along this path. He lay pale and bleeding beneath a shady tree—a thick, broken, bloodstained branch beside him. I did my best to staunch the wound on his head and to keep

him warm even as I shouted for help.

All along the way back to The Abbey, the men who helped me carry him on a litter, and then to place him in a wagon, recounted several strange riding accidents of which they had heard. It was their way, I realized later, of trying to make sense of what seemed impossible—that Lucien, an excellent horseman, would be so careless while riding among low-hanging branches.

I had the broken branch with me, though, to prove it, as much to myself as anyone. And I would show it to Lucien, I vowed, and ask him what the devil he was about.

A fractured skull, the doctor said. Lucien never regained consciousness.

I knew the sort of blind rage that is the consort of our worst grief. I thought of burning the branch that had struck him. I thought of taking an axe to the tree, felling that which had felled him. I thought of shooting the horse.

I did none of these. Perhaps it was the horse's name that cleared my mind: Fine Lad.

Charles needed me.

That single thought cooled my rage.

Lucien's will made me Charles's guardian and trustee. I knew he did not merely want me to keep Charles's fortune safe and take care that he was sent to the best schools. I was to teach him what The Abbey meant to his family, what it meant to be the Earl of Rolingbroke, what he owed to his name, and owed to the memory of two good men who



had held the same long list of titles before him. I had no fear that Charles would fail to be a credit to them—he was already so much his father's son.

**T**hat evening sitting before the fire remembering Lucien, I knew I would protect my young godson with my life. As the clock struck midnight, I vowed I would do my damndest to keep Lucien alive in his memory.

I had no sooner made this vow than the library door flew open, startling me. Charles, pale and tearful, ran toward me, frantically calling my name. I opened my arms to him, taking him up on my lap and waving away the small army of concerned servants whose grasp he had eluded.

As the door to the library closed again, I tried to soothe him. "What's wrong, nipperkin?" I asked, certain that I already knew the answer.

"Papa's alive again," Charles sobbed.

"What?" I said, thinking I must have misheard him.

"Papa's alive. But he was dead, and now he scares me."

Was this some strange manifestation of a child's grief, I wondered? "What do you mean, Charles?"

The boy shivered. "I mean I saw him. His ghost."

I sought an explanation. "You were sleeping—"

"It was not a dream!" he insisted, with a familiar obstinacy.

I hesitated, then asked, "Charles, have you been speaking to the Banes?" The odious family was

there—the dowager, Henry, William, and Fanny. The Banes had insisted on sleeping in a different wing from the one they had last occupied, although Henry now pooh-poohed the ghost story, saying it was undoubtedly one of Lucien's larks.

They had arrived, clearly, not so much for the funeral as for the reading of the will, and to say they were angry with its terms is to vastly understate the matter. Had William not intervened, the dowager, it seemed, would have been carried off on the spot by an apoplexy. "It is of no use, Mama," he said. "You should have known how it would be."

The dowager continued to bemoan her faithless nephew's lack of consideration for his own family, but not quite so intensely. Nevertheless, there was enough ill-concealed venom among the Banes to recall to me my first encounter with them, and I made sure Charles was never left alone with them.

"No," Charles said now. "I don't like them."

"You are a wise young man."

"Then why don't you believe me?"

"Did I say I did not believe you? Kindly refrain from making assumptions."

"What are those?"

"Er—don't believe you know something until you're sure you do know it."

He frowned as he puzzled this out, but he had stopped crying.

"Do you know, Charles, the more I think about this, the more I'm sure there is nothing to be frightened of here. Your father loved you

very much and would never harm you."

"Yes," he said slowly. "And I have a great many things I should like to say to him that I have been thinking of these past few days. But one can't help but be frightened of ghosts, even good ghosts."

"No one can blame you for feeling frightened. I'm glad you came to me. I promise I'll protect you, Charles. Your father asked that of me, and I gave him my word that I would."

He sat quietly with me for a time, lost in his own thoughts. He was past the age when he wanted to be carried or held, which gave me some idea of how terrified he was now. I was sure he had merely dreamed of Lucien, but I knew he did not believe this to be the case.

"Do you think he was trying to tell me something?" Charles asked.

"Perhaps he was," I said.

"What?"

I reached for a packet of fragile papers lying on the small table next to us. "Let's see if we can guess. When I was fighting in the Peninsula, and your father and I were far away from one another, he wrote these letters to me. Would you like me to read them to you?"

He nodded, and I chose one of the letters Lucien had written about him. He was pleased and laughed at Lucien's comical descriptions of him as an infant, then asked me to read another. So we continued, until he suddenly said, "I smell smoke."

"You *have* been listening to your Aunt Sophia."

But before he could protest, I

heard the shouts of the servants, and cries of "Fire!"

"We must help them put it out!" Charles said, jumping up from the chair.

I knew the same impulse, but what came quickly to mind were a series of drills that Lucien had insisted upon. I had always had the role of finding Charles in whatever room he might be in and taking him to safety. I used to argue with Lucien, saying that a man with a pronounced limp was hardly the most suitable person to be saving his heir, but he remained stubborn on this point. Remembering my vow of hardly more than an hour before, I grabbed Charles's hand before he was out of reach. "Your lordship," I said sternly, using the form of address which he knew to be a command to be on his best behavior. "You must not run toward the fire. You must allow me to keep you safe—just as we practiced. Come now."

I saw the briefest mulish cast to his face before he relented and allowed me to lead him out of the library. Fibbens, his face blackened with soot, was rushing down the stairs. "Oh, thank goodness!" he cried in relief. "Forgive me, captain—we feared the young master had returned to bed! His chambers are on fire!"

"My room!" the young master waived.

"He will tell you more when we are all safely outside," I said, more shaken by Fibbens' announcement than I cared to admit. "What of the staff and the other guests?" I asked as we made our way.



"Everyone accounted for, sir. The fire has not spread beyond the young master's chambers. If you do not mind, I'd like to assure the others that his lordship is safe—"

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you, sir. Those who are not attempting to put out the fire should be downstairs shortly."

At the front steps it occurred to me that we were without cloaks, and Charles was without shoes. A fault in our drills, which had taken place in summertime. There had been little snowfall of late, but it was cold. I placed my coat around Charles's small shoulders—much to his delight—and lifted him into my arms.

Soon the Banes began to join us on the front drive. Aunt Sophia was wrapped in what I recognized to be William's many-caped driving coat. She'd not had time to put on her wig and looked a positive fright. Fanny seemed to have borrowed boots from one of her brothers but wore no coat—she shivered in a rather unbecoming nightgown. Henry appeared before us still fully dressed but rather well-to-live as the saying goes—from his unsteady walk, I suspected he had made substantial inroads on The Abbey's wine cellars. William too was dressed, although from his mother's criticisms, it was clear that he had remained in the building longer than she believed safe.

"And look! Your new coat from Weston—ruined!"

The expensive coat of blue superfine was indeed smudged. "Unlike others I could name," he sneered, looking reproachfully at Henry, "I

attempted to make sure the old pile didn't burn down around my family's ears!"

Henry waved a vague hand of uninterest and stared at the building. Smoke had stopped billowing from the window of Charles's room. I prayed that meant the fire was under control.

"Here, Fanny," William said, taking off the coat. "You wear it. You look as if you're likely to freeze to death."

But Fanny, after bestowing a grateful smile on him, proved to be her mother's daughter. "Ugh!" she said, wrinkling her nose. "It smells of smoke."

William rolled his eyes.

"I do not know why I allowed you to talk me into staying at this accursed place!" his mother said to him.

"I talked you into it! That's a loud one!"

"Do not use that horrid cant with me, my young man! I won't have it!"

I realized that Charles was providing an interested audience to this byplay. Still holding him, I walked a bit apart from them.

Bogsley and Fibbens appeared, bearing cloaks and blankets. Fibbens attended the Banes while the elderly butler approached us.

"Bogsley, please tell me what has happened!" Charles said.

"I am pleased to say, your lordship, that the fire is out and little damage done. Your dear father had made preparations, you know, and the staff responded in a way that would make him proud if I do say so myself."

"The next time I see him, I shall



tell him how well you did," Charles said.

Bogsley, that most self-controlled of all God's creatures, did not blink an eye, but I heard the slightest catch in his voice as he answered, "Thank you, your lordship. I pray that will not be for some time yet."

"One never knows," Charles said.

Worried over the effect these words seemed to have on the butler, I quickly said, "You've given us good tidings indeed, Bogsley. I trust none of the staff took any hurt?"

"None whatsoever, sir."

"Please thank everyone for saving our home," Charles said, then turned to me. "Perhaps Cook could give a jam tart to each of them."

"Yes, or whatever other treat might be managed," I said, pleased with his show of manners but hard pressed to maintain my gravity.

"Your lordship is very kind," Bogsley said.

"Thank you so much for the cloak, Bogsley," I said. "I do not think his lordship intends to return my coat."

At this Charles laughed, and we made our way indoors.

Only the promise of a jam tart persuaded Charles to spend a few moments with Fibbens while I inspected the damage. The hallway reeked of smoke, but the flames had been confined to one portion of Charles's room.

"I'm afraid his lordship won't be able to sleep in here this evening, sir," Bogsley said.

"You remain the champion of understatement, Bogsley," Charles's bed had been reduced to ashes.

"Thank you, sir. It would seem that a candle or lamp was left burning on his nightstand and ignited the bed curtains."

"Except that being something of a little lion, his lordship does not suffer a fear of the dark as some children do. He *prefers* a dark room and has never required any sort of candle or lamp to be lit in his room. And in fact he closes his bed curtains about him to keep out the light."

"Yes, sir."

"I looked in on his lordship earlier this evening. He was sound asleep. There was no candle burning in here at that time. I brought one in with me and extinguished it while I was here, fearing the light would wake him. Has anyone else been here this evening?"

"Until we were engaged in extinguishing the fire, no, sir. I should say no member of the *staff* entered this room after his lordship called for you, Captain Edward. But by that time his lordship was rather determined to find you on his own."

"And the Banes?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say, sir—not just at this moment."

I knew he would discreetly question the Banes' servants. After a moment's silence I said, "I will speak plainly to you, Bogsley. I am concerned for his lordship's safety."

"Understandably so, sir."

"I will do my best to resolve this matter as soon as possible. In the meantime—"

"You may rely on me, sir—in-deed, on all of us."

"For which I'm grateful. Please have a truckle bed placed in my



room until we can make other arrangements. I need not add that I would prefer we do not alarm his lordship with our concern."

I thanked him again and fetched my nephew from the kitchen, where he was, as usual, being cosseted past redemption.

Charles, pleased that we would be sharing a room, nevertheless protested my plan to place him in my bed, while I slept on the truckle bed.

"But Charles," I said, "there are no bedcurtains on the truckle bed, and as you can see, there is a great deal of moonlight tonight."

He had no argument against this and thanked me politely before allowing me to tuck him in. "But keep the curtains open just a bit if you please. Then I shall know you are here, keeping me safe." So much, I thought, for hiding our concern.

I lay awake on the truckle-bed listening to his breathing settle into the rhythms of sleep. My feet suddenly felt a little cold, and then I heard a voice whisper, "Well done, Master Quakeboots."

I sat bolt upright. By the light of the moon I could make him out, a faint but definite image of my dead brother sitting at the foot of my bed.

My heart pounding, I opened my mouth to let out a cry, but I was frozen with fright.

"Please don't," he said. "I frightened Charles so badly early this evening I don't think I can forgive myself if I do so again. I cannot tell you how awful it is, Edward, to become a spectre of horror to those

you love. It nearly puts me in sympathy with Aunt Sophia, parading about without her wig."

I felt a giddy sensation but stopped myself short of laughing aloud. "By God, it *is* you!" I whispered.

"Lord Shivershanks, at your service." He gave his familiar little bow.

"Oh, Lucien, how I've missed you already! How shall we contrive to get along without you? Whatever possessed you to ride so carelessly?"

He gave me a look as cold as the winter night. "My dear Edward, do not be a sapskull! Would I have endangered my life—to say nothing of the future of that precious boy sleeping next to you? Carelessly tossed away my days with him? When since his arrival have you ever known me to take foolish chances?"

"Exactly my thoughts, Lucien, truly—"

"Yes, I heard you say so not long before I—well, I haven't completely departed, now have I?"

"How good it is to be able to speak to you again! But—is it terrible for you?"

"Not in the least—well, no, that isn't true. There are things that one longs for and can never have in this state, so one certainly feels a desire to—to get on with it, shall we say? As much as I am loath to leave you—and I promise you, I did my best to stay—now I feel something like a traveler who has harnessed his horses, placed his trunks on the coach, and climbed within—but sits in his own drive, not going forward."



"Not—not unsure of his destination!"

He laughed, and said, "Hardly gratifying that you have doubts! But you may be at ease on that score. I'm quite curious about the place, but my departure has been delayed. I gather I have some unfinished business here, and it isn't difficult to see what it is. First, we must find my murderer, for that person is threatening my son's life now that I am—supposedly—out of the way."

"Your murderer!" I said blankly.

"My dear Edward, have you not been attending?"

"The branch—"

"Was off the tree before it struck my head."

"But I saw the place on the tree where the branch had broken off. It was not cut clean, as it would have been if cut off the tree with an axe."

"I'm not saying my murderer was stupid. I'm only saying that the branch was already broken off the tree before it was applied—with some force—to my head."

"Then how—"

"I'm not sure of all the particulars, but I'll tell you what I do know. Examine Fine Lad, if you would, please—why are you looking so pale? You aren't going to faint on me, are you?"

"The horse—I almost had him shot."

He studied me for a moment, then said, "If I could have found a way to leave you without grief, Edward, I would have."

I could not speak.

"I take it the poor creature has

not been sent to his equine reward?"

"No, I decided that I needed to think of Charles and not of killing horses or felling trees."

"Dependable Edward. I could not have left Charles in better hands. Still, what impressive vengeance you planned on my behalf! I'm touched, truly. Now—let us channel that determination toward saving my son."

"Yes. Tell me more about what happened to you—and your horse."

"I was about to slow him, knowing we were coming up to that tree, when something slowed him for me—rather abruptly. Without the least warning, Fine Lad—who is quite surefooted—stumbled hard near that tree. I flew from his back, landing flat on my face, the wind knocked out of me—disgraceful, but please note that I was still holding fast to the reins. I had slowly raised myself to my hands and knees—a bit unsteadily—when suddenly a cloaked figure stepped out of the trees and knocked me senseless with that blasted branch. Hurt like the very devil—briefly."

"A cloaked figure?"

"I'm afraid he was off to one side—the better to swing that branch, I suppose. All I saw were a pair of men's boots—rather expensive Hessians if I'm any judge—and the front of a large, black cloak. I was struck down before I saw a face, but I'd lay odds my attacker was wearing a mask."

I considered this. "Can you travel from The Abbey grounds?"

"I'm not sure. I can move within





The Abbey and at least as far as where you were standing tonight. I'm rather new at this," he added apologetically.

"Were you in Charles's room when the fire started?"

"No, although—it's the strangest thing, Edward. I was merely looking in on him, watching him sleep, when I felt this urgent need to appear to him even though I knew it would scare him—as if it were so vital to awaken him I could not remain hidden."

"It was vital," I said. "Had he not come to me in the library, he might have perished in that bed."

"And Henry Bane would have become the Earl of Rolingbroke."

"Yes. But it was William whose coat smelled of smoke and showed signs of being singed."

"Hmm. How disappointing. William has actually spoken kindly to me once or twice in the past few years. But then, he needed to borrow money." He sighed. "He's not immediately in line for the title, but I suppose if two Rolingbrokes could be disposed of, Henry might have a short tenure as well."

"Who are you talking to?" a child's voice asked.

I looked in some dismay at Charles peering at me sleepily from the bed. I glanced toward Lucien, but he had disappeared.

"Myself, Charles."

"That's a loud one," he said, yawning.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, and thought I heard a ghostly chuckle near my ear.

But Charles had fallen asleep again, and though I whispered Lu-

cien's name, he did not reappear that night.

Charles was still sleeping peacefully when I bestirred myself just before dawn the next morning. I awakened Fibbens, who gladly kept watch over him while I went to the stables. I went down the row of stalls until I came to that of Lucien's favorite, Fine Lad. An old groom was with the big dark bay, applying fomentations to his legs.

"I'm afraid he'll be scarred, sir," the old man said, showing me the horizontal cuts that neatly crossed the front of Fine Lad's forelegs. "But he should be right as rain otherwise."

"Those wounds—could they have led to the late earl's injuries?"

"I wondered about it, sir, and thought p'haps he'd been tripped up like. But then there was that branch, so I figgered our Fine Lad here hurt himself on the way home."

"Tell me—what do you mean, tripped up?"

"It's an old bad 'un's trick, sir—he puts a rope across the road."

"But the earl would have seen such a rope."

"Beggin' your pardon but no, sir. The way it works is, Mr. Thief finds a place near a tree like and ties th' rope around its trunk. Then he lays the rope across th' road, and covers it with leaves so it's hidden. Along comes a fine gentleman like our lordship. Mr. Thief waits until he's near abreast of 'im and yanks hard as hell—beggin' your pardon—he pulls it tight, see, and the horse



can't stop nor mebbe even knows what's hit 'im, and while all's confusion, he coshes th' fine gentleman—if he ain't already knocked in the cradle by the fall. Then he robs him, and that's that."

"How do you know of this 'tripping up'? Has this ever happened near here before?"

"Oh, not near here, sir. But I remember it did happen to the earl's—beggin' your pardon—the late earl's uncle."

"Lord Alfred Bane?"

"Yes, sir. 'Is lordship's groom told me of it. Said that when 'is lordship were a young man, he was served just such a nasty trick and took an awful blow to the side of 'is brainbox—and that's how he went deaf in one ear, which is why 'is lordship was forever shouting. I used to hate it when that man came near our horses—his late lordship, I mean, no disrespect intended—but y'see, ours t'weren't used to all that shoutin' and carryin' on. So his groom tells me what happen'd t'him, and tells me that the robbers got to look nohow anyways 'cause Lord Bane hadn't more'n a few shillings on 'im, whilst they were caught and hanged, which is what they deserv'd."

I rode my own horse back to the place in the woods where I had found Lucien. I searched for a likely place for an ambush and found it just a few feet away. I did not find a rope, but one tree bore a mark on its trunk, a line that might have been made by a thin rope being pulled taut—and within the bark near that line I found strands of

bristly fiber as from a cord or rope.

I searched the side of the path directly opposite as I might have searched for signs of an enemy's camp during the war. My search was rewarded—I discovered another tree, with similar marks and fibers, as well as a spot with a good view of the path, where sticks and leaves had been crushed. It was a place near a fallen log where fragments of brown shell told me that someone had eaten walnuts while he waited for the sound of an approaching rider, a place where someone's boots had made marks in the soft, damp earth.

I spent a little time also in studying a third tree—the tree that had supposedly caused Lucien's injury—and the place where its deadly branch had broken off. I rode my horse slowly down the path, halting in front of the tree, which allowed me an even better view of the point of breakage.

Back at The Abbey I again examined the branch. I spoke to Bogsley and two other servants before I went to my room and changed out of my riding clothes—which had become somewhat soiled during my explorations. I cleaned up in time to join Charles for breakfast. By then most of the family was in the breakfast room. Lady Bane—wearing a purple turban—declared that the previous evening's disturbance had quite ruined her appetite.

I thought Charles might make some remark about this, as her plate was quite full, but he seemed lost in his own thoughts, not even responding to her lecture about young children never being allowed



to dine with their elders at Bane House. At one point he looked up and smiled and winked at me just as his father might have done. But before I could respond with more than an answering smile, my attention was drawn back to Lady Bane, who asked why I was smiling and if I thought fires in the middle of the night were amusing.

"Mother!" William said desperately, "Your breakfast grows cold. Do try to eat something."

She ignored him. She had other complaints to make and ended her lengthy list of criticisms by saying, "We are leaving immediately after breakfast, Edward, and I cannot tell you what a relief it will be!"

"I'm sure it defies description," I said.

She eyed me in an unfriendly manner but was distracted when William said, "I am staying—if it will not be an imposition, Edward?"

"Staying!" Lady Bane thundered. "Why?"

"To better acquaint myself with my cousin," he said.

"Edward is not your cousin!"

"I meant Cousin Charles," William said, then added, "And Edward, too, of course."

Henry, who entered the room at just that moment, said, "An excellent notion, William! I believe I will join you."

William seemed displeased but said nothing. There was no opportunity for him to speak. Lady Bane found their plans extremely objectionable. However, when Fanny said, "I'll leave with you, Mother," the matter was decided.

It was decided because Lady

Bane, ever contrary, said, "No, I'll not have it said that I was backward in any attention due to my family. We'll all stay."

Into the awkward silence that met this decision came Charles's voice. "I wish to discuss a private matter with Uncle Edward," he said, then, frowning, added, "If you will excuse us, please?"

He took my hand and led me to the library. He closed the doors, then said, "All right, Papa!"

"Excellent, youngster!" Lucien said. "My son, as you can see, Edward, is a stout-hearted fellow."

"I've known that for some time now," I said.

"He whispered to me during breakfast!" Charles said gleefully. "He was with me while you were out riding this morning."

"And Fibbens?"

"I believe he has recovered from his initial shock," my brother said. "I've asked him to break it gently to Bogsley."

"Zooks, Lucien! Is this wise?"

"I'd prefer they knew rather than come across me, er—accidentally. Fibbens will be here shortly to take Charles through one of the passages to the servants' quarters. Charles will be my ambassador."

"That means I'm going to tell them *I'm* not scared of Papa, so then they won't be either. I'm helping."

"Yes," I said, "you are."

As soon as Fibbens—amazingly at home with members of the spirit world, it seemed to me—had led Charles from the room, I told Lucien what I had learned. He listened thoughtfully.



"I took another look at the branch this morning," I said. "I realized that the bloodstains were on a section of the branch that you could not have struck with your head while riding, a part of the branch that was too close to the trunk of the tree—close to where it broke off from the trunk."

"A part of the branch much thicker, I suppose, than the section I would have struck if I *had* ridden into it."

"Yes. The Banes undoubtedly heard the story of their father's encounter with ruffians many times. And of the persons currently staying or working at The Abbey, only the Banes and their personal servants would not know that Charles prefers his chambers to be darkened."

"It could be one of the Banes' servants, I suppose," Lucien said, and I did not miss the note of hopefulness in his voice.

"No servant would gain from your death, Lucien. I don't like the idea of scandal in the family any more than you do, but Charles is very young, and by the time he is in society, this will be long forgotten."

Lucien gave a bitter laugh. "Murder is unlikely to pass so quickly from even the *haut ton's* collection of shallow minds. But for no, our first thoughts must be for Charles's safety."

"Yes."

"So it's a Bane," he said. "I don't believe it was Lady Bane—she would have made sure her wig was on."

I laughed. "Nor can I picture her

waiting patiently in the woods or wearing Hessians."

"But now what?"

"I'm not certain which of the three 'thatchgallows,' as you once called them, it is."

"Surely not Fanny?"

"I would have ruled her out until you told me of the boots. She was wearing a pair of them last night—and William and Henry were each already wearing their own. She's strong. And remember how she used to spy on us?"

"But what would she have to gain?"

"I don't know. Does she bear you any grudge?"

"Nothing to signify." He couldn't exactly blush, but he was obviously embarrassed.

I raised a brow. "She had a *tendre* for you?"

"She believed we ought to marry. It was certainly not out of affection—it was a stupid idea placed in her head by her pushing mama. Aunt Sophia also tried to persuade my father that I should marry Fanny, but he was opposed—said he had seen at least three bad results of a marriage of first cousins. Alfred Bane was their first cousin, you will remember. Aunt Sophia was quite insulted, and nothing was said for years, but shortly after he died—let us say I told them I would respect my father's wishes on the matter. When I became a widower, I almost thought Fanny would raise the subject again, but I think the notion of being stepmama to Charles put an end to her pursuit. Now—let's look at Henry and William, then. William's coat reeked of smoke."



"According to Fibbens, William did attempt to help put out the fire. But since he was not trained in one of your drills, he was more a nuisance than a help, and Bogsley, in his inimitable Bogsley way, persuaded him to leave before he caused harm. Still, how did he find out about the fire so much sooner than the others?"

"And Henry?"

"Supposedly drunk."

"Supposedly?"

"Oh, several bottles of your finest port are missing."

"Charles's port! But you sound as if you doubt Henry drank them."

"I'm not sure. I find myself wondering where the empty bottles are and why, at breakfast this morning, he did not appear to be suffering any ill effects after such a binge."

"A veteran drinker might be able to manage both the bottles and the morning."

"True. And since I have long avoided the Banes, I have no idea if our cousin is a souse or abstemious."

"Which leaves us where we started."

"Do you know, this morning I found myself thinking like a soldier for the first time in a long time."

"Meaning?"

"We must use strategy, Lucien. And I believe we would do well to take the offensive rather than wait for the murderous Bane to make another attempt on Charles's life."

"Ah!" he said, smiling. "You want to set a trap."

"Yes. We will each have a role—including Charles. Do you suppose,

dear Lucien, that you could play the part of a headless monk?"

Act I, Scene I, took place just outside the morning room door. Lucien told us that Henry had settled into a chair before the fire to read a newspaper there, thus determining where we must stage our play. Charles proved to be his father's equal as an actor. He acted out a perfect tantrum, with Fibbens providing able support.

"There's no such thing as ghosts!" Charles shouted angrily.

"Perhaps not, your lordship," Fibbens said anxiously, "but the north tower is dangerous. Your father meant to undertake repairs but—"

"I'm not afraid. It's *my* treasure!"

"Not so loud, please, your lordship!" Fibbens said, knowing perfectly well that Henry Bane was undoubtedly pressing his ear to the door.

"Uncle Edward knows how to find it," Charles declared. "We're going treasure hunting!"

"Not with a houseful of guests, your lordship. It would be—er, impolite."

That was my cue. "Charles, Charles! Are you talking that treasure nonsense again?" I asked. After a brief pause I said, "Fibbens, I believe I will need my heavier cloak—and his lordship will need his own as well."

"Yes, sir," Fibbens said and, treading heavily, left the hallway.

"Charles, what have I told you about the treasure?"

"That we will find it tonight because you promised Papa you would show me where it is."



"Yes. And what else?"

"Not to tell the Banes. But Fibbens isn't the Banes."

"Fibbens is entirely trustworthy, but you never know who might be listening. So please don't discuss it with anyone else. Now, here's Fibbens with our cloaks. Have you your gloves? Excellent. Let's go for our walk."

Two slight variations on this performance were given—one for the benefit of Fanny and one for William.

Only Lady Bane seemed to enjoy a normal appetite at dinner that evening. Charles kept looking conspiratorially at me, which required no real acting.

Lucien's role was proving the most difficult. To our dismay he could not move objects, and any attempt to dress him in something other than the riding clothes he had been wearing on the day of his accident met with utter failure. Bogsley had unearthed the old headless abbot—the one the village seamstress had manufactured for that long ago Christmas haunting. It was losing its stuffing and looked a little aged, but we only needed the robe itself. When Lucien tried to put it on, however, it simply fell to the ground.

Making the best of what he could do, he practiced materializing and soon had the knack of partial materialization. "I do so hate the prospect of being dead from the neck up," he said when he'd managed to appear before us without a head. Charles, who had been rather thrilled with our story of swinging the "headless monk" past the

Banes' windows, asked the housekeeper if it might be possible to repair it. She stuffed a few pillows into the old costume, and our headless abbot had yet another round of life. Before falling asleep Charles enjoyed playing with this large, if rather gruesome, doll.

"Boys is all alike" was the housekeeper's assessment, with a nod toward Lucien and me.

At ten o'clock that evening I awakened Charles from his brief slumbers. Bundled up in warm clothing, we carried shielded lanterns as we went through one of the secret passages to the North Tower. The tower was built into the rise on which The Abbey stood. Perhaps at one time, it had indeed towered over the castle that had been here, but very little of the castle remained. Now the only apparent entrance to the tower was near the top of what remained of it—the tower was more akin to a well than a tower: more of it was reached by descending a staircase than by climbing. It was dank, musty smelling, and of no practical use.

I knew of no Rolingbroke who would dream of tearing it down.

After the treasure story had been spread about, Fibbens, several footmen, and other servants had taken turns keeping an eye on the Banes. None of them had yet been seen at the only tower entrance—the only entrance they would know of.

In addition to that entrance, there were two means of reaching the tower by secret passage. The one we were in ended on a sturdy, wide, stone platform, about half-





way up (or down, as it seemed) the tower. Above us a relatively new wooden staircase led to the usual tower entrance, off one of The Abbey hallways. Below us, at the foot of a crumbling stone staircase, was the other secret passage. As boys, Lucien and I had explored it, half-hoping, half-dreading we'd encounter the Headless Abbot. We found damp stones and little else.

Charles and I waited in relative comfort, hidden from view, our lantern shielded. We soon knew who the first of our arrivals would most likely be—Lucien came to report that within a few minutes of one another Henry and Fanny had each softly knocked at the door to my room and peered inside. They had then hurried back to their own rooms.

But it was William who opened the door at the top of the stairs, carrying a candle. He was halfway down the stairs when the door opened a second time. He turned to see Fanny. "What on earth are you doing here?" he asked her.

"I might ask the same of you."

"I'm looking for Henry. Do you know where he is?"

"I haven't the vaguest. Where are Edward and the brat?"

In the darkness of our hiding place I laid a finger to Charles's lips. He nodded his understanding.

"How should I know?"

"I should have known it was all a Banbury tale," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to gammon me, dear brother. You're here looking for the treasure, too!"

"I'm not worried about any treasure—"

"Not worried about any treasure! That's a loud one! You who've been punting on River Tick for I don't know how long!"

"If Mama could hear you using such terms—"

"Mama is sound asleep. Go on, deny that you're one step ahead of the bailiff."

"All right, I deny it. I'm not in debt. I've come about—thanks to Cousin Lucien."

"What!"

"I never told you or Henry, but it's true. He helped me, Fanny."

"Why you?"

"Because he cared about the family, bacon-brain! Wasn't just the money—he talked to me. Made me think, I tell you. So anyone planning further mischief around here will have to come through me. I was too late for Lucien, and last night I was sure I was too late to help Charles. But now I've caught you, and I tell you I won't allow it!"

"Help Charles? Mischief? What on earth are you talking about?"

"My horse is in the stall next to Fine Lad. I think you know what that means."

"That he's eating his head off at his lordship's expense."

"Fanny!"

She eyed him malevolently.

"Enough of your nonsense, William. Let me by. Edward and the brat will be here any minute—probably working their way through the secret passage now."

"Secret passage!" William said.

"What secret passage?"

"The place is full of them. Don't



you remember my telling you so when we were down here that last Christmas?"

William frowned. "No."

"Well, maybe I told Henry, then. Which is of no importance in any case! Move off this staircase before I have to shove you off!"

"Touch me, and I'll tell Mama that nothing pleases her spinster daughter so much as to dress up like a man and ride astride!"

"Oh! You won't be alive to tell her! They'll be burying you next to Lucien!"

"Now!" I heard Lucien say, and I pulled the shield off the lantern.

The sudden light caught the attention of the two Banes. But it was Lucien who caused William to give out a bloodcurdling scream.

Charles clung to me, apparently more frightened by the scream than anything that had gone before.

"Lord Almighty!" Fanny said. "You frightened the life right out of me. What's gotten into you! You'll bring the whole house down on us!"

William, the color gone from his face, pointed a shaking hand toward Lucien.

"What?" Fanny said. "Speak up, now!"

"The Headless Abbot."

"Headless Abbot! I don't see any Headless Abbot! It's just a light coming from one of those passages I told you about."

"Don't you see him?" William cried. "In riding clothes!"

"Are you back to giving me trouble over that? What's it to you if I find men's clothes more sensible for riding?"

Lucien tried moving closer to her. But while William swayed on his feet, Fanny was oblivious to him.

"William?" she said. "Are you feeling quite the thing?"

In frustration Lucien materialized completely.

"Lucien!" William said and fainted. Unfortunately, he was still on the stairs when this happened. Lucien tried to make a grab for him, but William fell right through him, tumbling down to the ledge.

Now Fanny screamed, but obviously she still could not see my brother.

"Fibbens, please take his lordship to safety," I said over Charles's protests. "Ask Bogsley to bring some men with a litter to me." And picking up a lantern, I limped out as quickly as I could to the landing, where William lay in a heap.

"Edward!" Fanny called, hurrying down the stairs and straight through Lucien without so much as a blink, "Oh, help him, Edward!"

She stood nervously watching me. William made a groaning sound and opened his eyes. "Edward?" he said dazedly. "Was it you all along?"

He then caught sight of Lucien standing behind me, though, and fainted once again.

I did my best to make him more comfortable. "Help will be here soon, Fanny," I said.

"He's broken his arm," Lucien said, "but I don't think he has any more serious injuries. Why do you suppose he could see me but she can't?"

"I don't understand it," I said.

Fanny, thinking I spoke to her,



said, "Well! I understand it! It's all because of Lucien's stupid story about the monk. He thought he saw the ghost. Just your lantern light, I daresay."

We heard a sound then, a faint cracking noise from below.

Fanny's face grew pale. "The abbot!" she said weakly.

"Henry," I called, "are you down there in the dark eating walnuts?"

A long laugh echoed up the tower.

"Henry!" Fanny exclaimed.

"Get help," I said to Lucien.

"I'll stay here, thank you," Fanny replied. "Besides, you said help is already on the way."

"Oh, it is, dear Fanny, it is!" Henry said, lighting a lantern. He started up the stone stairs. "Where's Charles?"

Lucien made a wild banshee sound and swooped toward Henry. Nothing.

"Never mind the brat," Fanny said impatiently. "Here's your brother broken to bits!"

"I wouldn't trouble yourself too much over William, Fanny," Henry said. "He discovered my little plan, so I think it's best if the next accident concerning an earl has something to do with trying to save my brother. Edward and Charles make a valiant, combined effort. Alas, it will be unsuccessful."

"Will no one talk sense to me?" Fanny asked.

"Your brother Henry wants to be an earl," I said. "So he murdered Lucien—right, Lucien?"

"Right."

But Henry laughed and said, "Don't tell me you think you can try that ghost business on me at this

age, Edward! Now where's that treasure? I warn you, I'm armed."

"You'll never own The Abbey's treasure," I said. "The Abbey's treasure then, as it is now, was in the good men who have lived here—Lucien and his father and Charles."

"Henry," Fanny said, "tell me you didn't harm Lucien!"

"Lucien? Oh, not just Lucien. Don't forget his father and his ninyhammer of a stepmother—you didn't think that carriage overturned by chance?" I heard the sound of rock falling, and Henry said, "When I am earl, I shall have these steps repaired."

"You'll never be earl!" Lucien vowed.

I heard a commotion in the passageway. Fibbens' voice was calling desperately, "Your lordship, no!"

Suddenly a white, headless figure with a bloodstained cassock came barreling onto the landing. Fanny, who did not see me grab hold of the small boy who carried it, let out the fourth scream to assault my ears in nearly as many minutes.

Lucien grabbed the pillow ghost, and went flying off the landing. Literally. Previously unable to support it, this time—perhaps somehow strengthened by his need to protect Charles—he was able to make the Headless Abbot billow impressively and to aim it directly at Henry Bane. Henry fired his pistol at it, but the stuffed costume came at him inexorably and knocked him from the stone stairs. His fall was harder than William's, and fatal.

I called to Lucien, but he had disappeared.



Two weeks later, William, recovered enough to be moved, left with his sister and the much quieter dowager for Bane House. They wanted to be home in time for Christmas, which was drawing near. William and his sister were getting along fairly well by then—as we all were—and none of us told the dowager about her daughter's clothing preferences. Although a scandal of a far more serious nature had been avoided, both Henry's duplicity and his death had left Lady Bane shaken.

But even with the Banes gone and the immediate crisis over, I was feeling dismal, as was Charles. One night he came to the library at midnight, upset—not because he saw a ghost, but because it had been so long since he *had* seen one. I tried to explain his father's traveling coach analogy, but Charles wanted that coach to return. "At least for visits," he said tearfully.

I took out the packet of letters

again, and read to him—this time, the letter Lucien had written to me on the death of his wife.

"I used to be able to picture her so clearly after she was gone," a familiar voice said. "To feel her watching over Charles and me, sharing our joys. Do you know, I believe I now know why Fanny and Henry couldn't see me but you who've loved me can?"

"Papa!" Charles cried out.

"Yes, my boy, I'm back—for a visit."

Gradually, over the years, we saw less and less of him. By the time Charles had grown into a man, it was no longer necessary to trouble Lucien to be our ghost. By then we knew how to recall his spirit in other ways—through fond remembrance, and the knowledge that we can never be truly parted from those we love.

And that, I've come to believe, is the true spirit of Christmas.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the February issue.*

The excited voice on the phone said, "That you, captain? This is Harry—Harry Katz—the manager over at the Empress. It's murder, captain! Murder!"

"Calm down, Mr. Katz," said Captain Evan Hupp. "You say someone's been murdered in your hotel?"

"Oh yes, yes! The poor woman's bled all over the carpet. Probably have to buy a new one."

"Don't touch anything," Hupp warned him. "I'm on my way."

What a way to spend Saturday morning, thought the captain. The Empress Hotel had more than its share of criminal activity, but this was the first killing in his fifteen years on the L.A. police force.

The balding little manager was waiting in the lobby. "Absolutely horrible, captain!" he wailed. "This will ruin my tourist business for the season."

"Just take me to the body," said Hupp.

As they rode up on the elevator, Katz complained. "I shoulda expected something like this. I'm certain I recognized the five couples from WANTED posters in the post office."

"You should have reported any suspicious characters," declared Hupp.

"What? And alarm all my other guests? Bad for business, y'know."

The elevator stopped, and the two men stepped into the hallway. The manager led the way to the fatal room. A bellhop stood guarding the door. "Sir," he reported, "nobody's been in or out since Hannah—she's the chambermaid—found 'er."

"Good," said Captain Hupp, walking into the room.

The woman, fairly young, was obviously dead, her throat slit from ear to ear. Body still warm, blood not congealed. No signs that the room had been searched. Her handbag lay on the dressing table.

"Okay, who is she?" Hupp asked.

"I can't recall her name offhand," replied Harry Katz. "She and her husband registered from Utah. He must have signed a card at the desk."

"Where is her husband now?"

"I have no idea, captain."

The bellhop spoke up. "He left this morning. I took his suitcase down

around eight. But he didn't kill that lady. I happened to see another man leaving this room just before Hannah went in and started screamin' bloody murder."

"Who?"

"Gee, sir, I don't know, except in shiftin' and tradin' rooms this week he occupied the exact same rooms as that lady lyin' there. I'm sure of that, since I had to lug all them suitcases around."

"Well, that's a start," declared the captain. He turned to the manager. "Stay here while I check with the desk clerk. And keep everybody out!"

He rode the elevator back down to the lobby. The desk clerk remembered the five troublesome couples clearly. From his detailed descriptions Captain Hupp recognized the men as criminals wanted in Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, and Ohio.

"Frankly, sir," said the clerk, "they gave me a hard time all week, from the time they registered on Monday. Every other day they insisted on exchanging rooms, and with each couple on a different floor—floors one through five—I had to keep shifting their cards."

"If they traded rooms," reasoned the captain, "it means the five couples knew one another and that each felt insecure when remaining in unfamiliar surroundings very long. Too much chance of discovery by outsiders, I suppose. Perhaps later I can find out why they chose to gather here at the Empress Hotel this week. It may have some connection with the woman's brutal murder. But please continue."

From the account of the desk clerk the following facts came to light:

(1) Upon checking in Monday forenoon, Flora was assigned a room on the floor just below Mrs. Queen and just above the woman whose husband is wanted in Nevada. They are married (in one order or another) to Andrew, Brad, and Carl.

(2) That same morning the man wanted in Michigan was given a room on the floor just below Mr. Peters (who isn't Brad) and just above the man registering from Wyoming. They are married (in some order) to Greta, Helen, and Janice.

(3) On Wednesday the couples on floors one and three traded rooms as did those on floors two and four. As a result, the woman from Utah was on the floor just below Irene and just above Mrs. Simpson. Their husbands are wanted in Louisiana, Michigan, and Ohio (in some order).

(4) Also, after the exchanges on Wednesday Mr. Tuttle was on the floor just below Edwin and just above the man wanted in Nevada. Their present homes are (in one order or another) in Texas, Wyoming, and Virginia.



(5) On Friday the couples on floors one and five exchanged rooms, the other couples staying in the rooms they occupied on Wednesday. At that time Donald (who is not married to Helen) was on the floor just below Janice's husband (who is neither Andrew nor the man residing in Texas) and just above the man wanted in Louisiana. Their last names included Peters, Rankin, and Simpson. The man from Wisconsin was on a still lower floor.

After carefully reviewing his notes Captain Evan Hupp exclaimed, "Aha! If the killer occupied the very same rooms as his victim but at different times during the week, he can only be \_\_\_\_\_, wanted in the state of \_\_\_\_\_."

Unholstering his police special, he proceeded to floor \_\_\_\_\_ to make the arrest. Thus the Case of the Wanted Room Swappers was brought to a speedy solution.

*Who was the unfortunate woman from Utah? Where was she murdered? By whom?*

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See page 138 for the solution to the December puzzle.

.....  
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"UNSOLVED"

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FICTION

J. Edward Brown

KARGO  
KULT AND  
MR. AND MRS.  
GATSBY

Illustration by Kelly Denato

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01

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**M**r. and Mrs. Gatsby arrived at the South Seas atoll on a large white yacht. Each day the Gatsbys would come ashore, he in a suit, a different suit, checks, plaids, stripes, flecked, plain, and matched with shirts of different colors and ties of varied hue. On the sand, after wading from the dinghy, he'd put on socks and shoes and stroll around the village, chatting, distributing paper-wrapped sweets.

Mrs. Gatsby wore a different dress each day, but she also wore different wigs—black, brown, blonde, red, longhaired, shorthaired, frizzy.

The villagers were amazed; they'd never seen anything like this pair. The few yachties who called came ashore in shorts, barefooted, often shirtless, the women with maybe a skimpy strip of material tied around their upper body that didn't conceal anything. The village pastor, on Sundays, sometimes harangued against such people while the village women in their long white dresses with mutton-chop sleeves nodded approvingly and the men nodded but wished there'd be more visitors like that.

Mrs. Gatsby was the more interesting. The islanders had never seen such wigs. They were astounded that Mrs. Gatsby would put on different hair and entirely change her appearance. It was weird! It was out of this world! It was magic!

Kargo Kult was the chief's name, spelt with K's in South Seas fashion. In the Second World War his grandfather had seen the goods the Americans had—jeeps, trucks, radios, canned food, clothes—the cargoes of the gods. All islanders had been envious. After the war there had been stories that one day their island would receive their very own load of cargo from the gods. It happened all over the Pacific; the cargo cult was goods for nothing, without working. Kargo Kult's grandfather had insisted that one day the islanders' ship would come in and everything their hearts desired would be given to them.

It had never happened, of course, even though his grandson had taken the name of Kargo Kult—to encourage the gods.

Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby had come ashore that first morning and asked to be shown to the headman's hut so they could pay their respects. They had given Kargo Kult a present—a bottle of after-shave lotion—useless because he removed the few hairs on his chin by plucking with tweezers. And for Mrs. Kargo Kult there was a large pair of fashion sunglasses so dark she couldn't see through the lenses.

But here it was, their ship had come in, obviously with a small cargo but cargo nonetheless. If he were wearing those suits, Kargo Kult felt his grandfather would be vindicated.

From the deck of the yacht Mr. Gatsby often stared through a telescope at the heavens. The telescope was brass, long. Magnificent! Kargo Kult wanted it.

But this cargo was going to escape. Kargo Kult would have to do

something quickly. The yacht wouldn't stay long, yachts never did, a few days. Kargo Kult had a shrewd idea that when the changes of suits and wigs came to an end they would sail. But how many suits and wigs did they have? It would be a matter of judgment for Kargo Kult to pick his moment.

If Kargo Kult had those suits and shirts and ties, what a figure he would cut at church on Sundays! And his wife in the wigs! After-shave and sunglasses? Poof!

When the pair came ashore, it was a parade, or maybe a charade. They would come in to the beach with Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby standing upright, balancing each other so their finery did not become crumpled or wet. A crewman, a black Solomon Islander from far away, controlled the dinghy's outboard engine and held a black umbrella over the pair.

They returned to the yacht before the main heat of the day and sat on the deck under the awning, reading and listening to a radio.

Nobody was ever invited aboard. The Solomon Islander never set foot on the sand. He brought them in and went back, and repeated the trip when signaled. He was completely aloof. Of course as far as this island was concerned, the Solomon Islander might just as well have been from outer space—and so might the couple.

How to get the goods?

"Beware of gods bearing gifts," the pastor misquoted.

Kargo Kult ignored him.

The yacht was registered in San Francisco, which was in America according to the schoolteacher, who showed Kargo Kult a school atlas. And that gave the chief food for thought.

This island hadn't attacked and plundered a sailing ship since the nineteenth century. It had happened then. Of course it had. Several times. The island had had a reputation as an unfriendly place, to be avoided.

Then, in later years, Peruvian slavers had arrived. The islanders still talked of the time when young able-bodied men—and a few beautiful-bodied young women—were taken away to be slaves in the guano mines, and none had come back.

And Peru was in America.

Kargo Kult justified himself. It was time for revenge, compensation for the harm done to the island by the Peruvians.

And the Gatsbys were golden-skinned, as if, somewhere, there were brown ancestors. These two could, in fact, be distant descendants of this island. And they were searching for their past? But they were too proud to say? The schoolteacher said they could be having an identity crisis. Kargo Kult wanted to know what that was. The schoolteacher confessed he didn't know, he had read it in a book.

But if Kargo Kult stole the suits, that would be theft, which was not lawful and was immoral. There must be a way around such a problem.

Kargo Kult thought he should have lived in a different century when he could have just taken what he wanted.

Kargo Kult brooded. Years ago the people had laughed at his grandfather when he talked of cargo, even though he had been able to call up storms. He was a considerable witch doctor. Of course that word wasn't used today; the government frowned upon it. But at this distance from the capital the old ways hadn't disappeared. And Kargo Kult had inherited his grandfather's powers. But like his grandfather he had never been able to call up a cargo of manufactured goods.

Kargo Kult was a keen student of the heavens—which could have accounted for his ability to call up storms, although you could call it meteorology, of course.

Perhaps the yacht would sink, in a storm? And Kargo Kult would save it. Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby would be grateful. They were grateful now because Kargo Kult supplied coconuts and oranges and baskets of yams and taro and arrowroot, but that was just natural courtesy. It would have to be something above and beyond normal.

In return for the food Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby had received, they gave out Jew's harps, plastic whistles, spinning tops, and packets of assorted vegetable and flower seeds. But that wasn't what Kargo Kult wanted.

Kargo Kult sat in the shade of his hut and looked at the large yacht. The sun glinted on the brass telescope. It would be his before the yacht sailed. And all the clothes.

Kargo Kult had offered to have Mr. Gatsby's suits washed; Mrs. Kargo Kult did have a charcoal-fueled iron for pressing. But Mr. Gatsby refused. Kargo Kult offered to trim Mrs. Gatsby's wigs—he had hand-operated barber's clippers, and he was an excellent hair cutter. They'd refused. Ungrateful!

Kargo Kult studied the sky. A hurricane? But it wasn't the season.

The Gatsbys were from heaven, spirit people of their ancestors? Why else did the man stare at the heavens at night? He was looking at his home. But he couldn't go home until he had made gifts.

Kargo Kult acted. Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby were invited ashore, at night, for a feast and dancing. Mr. Gatsby wasn't eager. He asked why dancing couldn't be done in the morning. Kargo Kult said dancing could only be performed after the sun had gone down. A lot of rot, of course, but they might think it a native custom.

They accepted.

The Solomon Islander was ashore also, big, black, and handsome, so the girls said—but their attitude was deplorable, so Mrs. Kargo Kult said.

The entertainment commenced without Kargo Kult. He swam out to the yacht, hauled himself aboard. He found the suits and the wigs and tried them on in the light of his torch. The suits fitted. Just his size, as if tailored for him. He raised his eyes to heaven. They were meant for

him! So were the wigs, his head size exactly—the same as his wife's. They were signs. They had been brought for them. Perhaps they were too shy to present them? That must be it. Action was required. And the action would be remotely controlled. Kargo Kult fiddled with the telescope lovingly and returned ashore.

That night, when the yacht people had returned to their boat, a storm came out of nowhere. The yacht was wrecked. The three people disappeared. The clothes floated in a large steamer trunk onto the beach in front of Kargo Kult's hut. The telescope was found by diving to the lagoon floor.

The people of the island thought Kargo Kult had summoned the storm, and he didn't disagree with that.

Why didn't the yacht people wake and save the yacht? It could have been something they ate or drank at the entertainment. The kava had been specially brewed.

The schoolteacher said they might have been Incas, a tribe who came from South America. Nobody understood that statement.

There were no inquiries about the yacht. The islanders didn't report the event.

There weren't enough suits and wigs for all, but on Sundays each man and woman was rostered for a suit or wig, shirt or tie, so that all could enjoy the cargo. A record was kept by the schoolteacher on a large sheet of paper of who was to wear what for the Sunday parades.

Kargo Kult had a complete plaid suit, a brilliant red and green tartan design, and a shirt and tie because he was the chief, and his wife had a blonde wig for her exclusive use. They were the handsomest couple.

And he had the telescope. He stares up at the heavens on most nights and wonders about the souls of Mr. and Mrs. Gatsby, and sometimes the Solomon Islander. He predicts another cargo boat coming, very soon, with enough complete suits and wigs for everybody.

He also forecasts the weather with great accuracy.



FICTION

# The Prism Box

D. A. McGuire

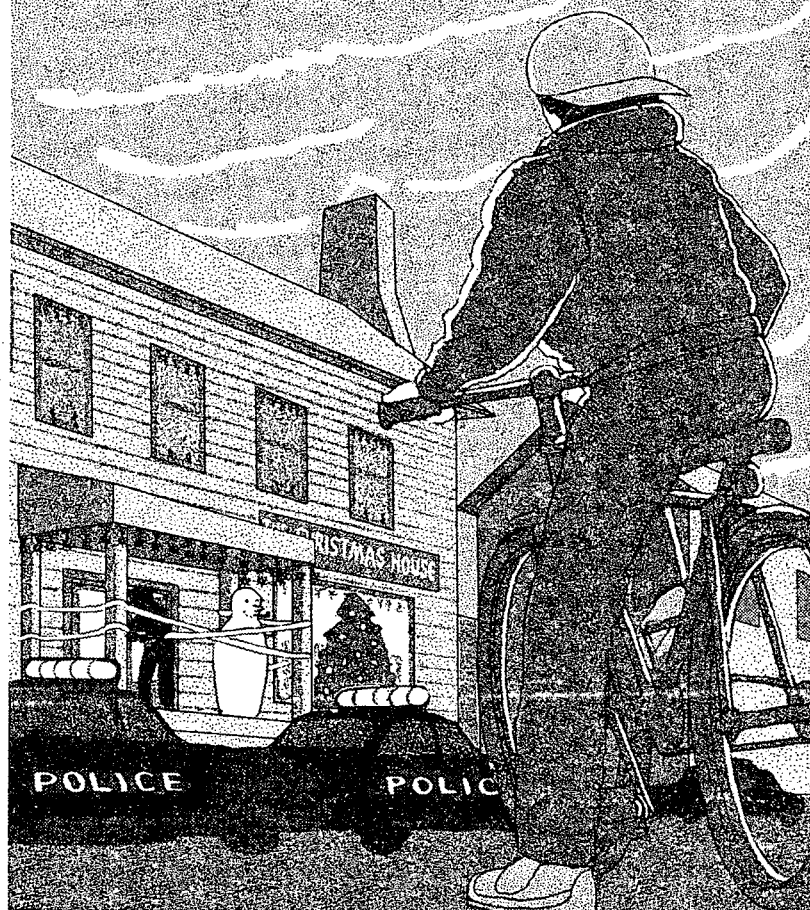


Illustration by David Fielding

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/01

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This is how it started, with me throwing my bike down into the leaves near where Mr. McAfee was working at blowing the same leaves away with a leaf-blower. I gave him a quick wave and ran towards the house. I'd called ahead, had expected to meet Rinn here after she got off work to spend a little time with her—maybe play a video game, get burgers for supper—then ride back home in time to finish an English assignment that had been hanging over my head for a week now. (Assigned eight days ago, due tomorrow, the usual kind of thing.)

It was early December, an unusually mild afternoon, temperature near fifty but with a gray gloom coming in over the bay. The unseasonable weather wasn't expected to last much longer; local weathermen were forecasting the first snow by week's end. That was fine by me now that we were in the holiday period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'd hoped to spend part of my holidays with Rinn, try to cheer her up as best I could. Oh, she was with a good family now, a late-middle-aged couple with grown children who took in kids for the state, mostly kids in their early to mid teens. There were two boys playing a little pickup basketball near the garage, and they called for me to join them, but I waved them off, saying, "Got to see Rinn," as I leaped the steps to the McAfees' side porch.

"Go right up, Herbie. Rinn just got in a few minutes ago" was Mrs. McAfee's cheerful greeting. I could smell chicken frying, apple pies

baking, fresh coffee brewing. The McAfees provided a warm, comfortable, and secure haven for kids who'd never experienced much warmth, comfort, or security from their own families. I'd been grateful, not to mention elated, when Jake told me he'd helped to find a "very good foster placement" for my good friend Rinn-Alice Ryder.

Sometimes it was great knowing a police detective. Not only was Jake Valari a friend, but he'd helped my mother find a good job with the Manamasset school system, helped us find a house we could afford, and now here he was again, pulling strings for a girl I'd known only a few weeks. Rinn was a girl without much family: ailing grandmother in a rehab center, sister in prison, father dead. I'd never asked Rinn about her mother; with some people there were things you just didn't inquire about.

That Rinn Ryder had had a rough start, in fact a rather rocky first fourteen years of her life, was an understatement. Originally from Westfleet, a small community on the Outer Cape, she had been moved to my hometown of Manamasset, an even smaller community just this side of the Cape Cod Canal. Rinn was a year behind me in school, grade eight, but I'd made certain she got settled into school okay, escorted her around the junior high myself, and introduced her to all my old teachers and guidance counselors. I'd even had her meet a couple of friends who were a year younger than me.

Though I'd made it very clear that friends were all these guys

were going to be, there to help Rinn ease the transition between schools. Most the time I'd be stuck in the Freshman Wing of the junior high, an addition built fifteen years ago for the ninth grade. As such, unless I was in gym class or going to the library, I wouldn't be seeing much of Rinn at school. We freshmen even had our own cafeteria.

"You help her out," I'd told one old buddy at his locker; Rinn wasn't unattractive, and I wasn't naive. "And if anyone bothers her, you let me know."

"So you and her—" Then the kid had made an obscene gesture, and I'd had to knock him up against his locker. Though I'd always been kind of on the small side, in the last seven or eight months I'd gained some good height, even put on muscle in my arms and chest. Didn't hurt.

Not me, at any rate.

My friend had smiled, assured me he'd "look out for Rinn."

That had been all of three weeks ago. Since then Rinn had seemed to settle in okay, though she'd had one run-in with an English teacher, a woman I'd had in the eighth grade and liked well enough. I convinced Rinn to take the two nights' detention without any lip or argument, do what she was told, and roll with the punches.

So, except for that one minor altercation, it seemed things were really going well for her. She'd found a part-time job at the Christmas House, a local gift shop that did most of its business between the two holidays. She could only work a few hours a week, but it

was something, a routine and a responsibility that Rinn needed in her life. I'd even gone in once to buy gifts for my mother and her grandmother.

All in all, things seemed to be moving along pretty well.

As I was halfway up the stairs to Rinn's room, Mrs. McAfee called out, "Plan to stay for supper, Herbie. We're having fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and cole slaw. Apple pie for desert."

"Thanks," I called down. "I think I will."

Rinn's room was on the second floor above a porch or breezeway that connected the garage to the main house. The house itself was a fifties-era, two story colonial, a common style for this part of Manamasset, made up of lower to middle income people, a mixture of working class and professional types. The McAfees had originally added this extra room, plus one over the garage, for their large family of two adults, six children. Now all but one of their children were married. This left a large, five bedroom home with plenty of room for kids like Rinn. In fact, Rinn had been given the best bedroom, the one over the porch. It shared a small bathroom with an adjoining bedroom that was now empty, belonging to the daughter in college.

Anyhow, I dashed upstairs shedding my jacket as I did and rapped on Rinn's door. There was no answer, but the door opened slightly so I called in. No answer again. I put my head in. The door to the bathroom was shut, and I could hear running water. I stepped just

inside the doorway, called out more loudly, "Rinn? You here?"

"Oh God, Herbie," I heard her reply, then: "I don't want you to see me like this . . ." followed by something unintelligible about "the bedroom."

I was already there, in *the* bedroom. Good as these conditions were, as great as the McAfees were, and as much as Jake, my mother, and Rinn's new school—including classmates, teachers, counselors, and administrators—had bent over backwards to help Rinn feel safe, happy, and secure, we all had a way yet to go. This was *the* bedroom, not *my* bedroom in Rinn's mind. The McAfees were *those* people. The school was *that* school. Rinn had yet to make any kind of real connection or commitment to anything or anyone trying to help her. Except maybe for me; I think I was her one real friend.

So I sat down. The McAfees had provided an oldish but sturdy desk for Rinn, worn and scratched on the top, with a matching wooden chair. There was a double bed, twin dressers, even a rather worn but comfortable padded chair set next to the window, which overlooked the back yard. From there you could see the sloping lawns of the golf course bordering the southern fringe of Manamesset Bay. This was a nice area; these were nice, caring, committed people. Too bad Rinn was slow in seeing that.

I put my feet up on a low bookshelf and waited. A pile of Rinn's books were on the desk, so I leafed through them. From the bathroom I could still hear water running,

then Rinn either talking or coughing. I had no reason to think anything was wrong. I put a book, English, in my lap, started to flip through it, and came across a paper dated the day before. Apparently Rinn had gotten it back today. An F. Grammar quiz.

I was a good student, but suddenly that didn't seem very important. If I could have transferred a tenth of what I knew—schoolwise—to Rinn right now I would have. She'd repeated first grade; her marks in elementary school had been barely passing. She told me herself she didn't know how she had gotten through middle school. When I learned all this, I'd been unfailingly optimistic, believing like Jake and my mother that with the right support and encouragement she could be successful and overcome the problems inherent in a family who had preyed upon others for their livelihood.

For the truth was, Rinn came from a family of shysters, con-men, and thieves, a family that thrived on lies and scams in order to survive. From an early age Rinn had been taught to lie, to lead people on, to make them believe in a fantasy world that benefited only the Ryders. It had been a fluke of circumstances that she and I had ever met and gotten this far. Now, looking at that paper—concerning a subject I had tutored her in—I felt sick. I didn't believe Rinn was hopeless; the problem was that Rinn believed she was.

Three weeks ago I'd been sitting at a long conference table, the lone student at a meeting convened to

discuss Rinn's future and to write up a new IEP, or as the state termed it, an Individualized Educational Plan. I'd been told that it was highly unusual for someone my age, and who was not an immediate family member, to be a part of this "team," but that because the circumstances were also "highly unusual," an exception had been made. At the meeting had been a school counselor, a psychologist, the school nurse, two classroom teachers, two special education teachers, the assistant principal, Rinn's social worker, and a representative from the local police department, Detective Jacob Valari. Mr. McAfee, Rinn's foster father, was also there. And me.

"You won't be here for the entire meeting," Dr. Earle, the school psychologist, had told me at the beginning, "just this part of it. What we need to hear from you is how you see Rinn, her potential and her strengths and weaknesses. Frankly, Herbie . . ." This was a man I knew, coach of my sixth grade soccer team. ". . . you know her better than anyone here. There is no family representative, no parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent. Even her new social worker—" a nod to the gray-haired woman at the end of the table—"has only just met Rinn. So we're relying on you to give us your opinion."

"Yes," the social worker interjected just then, staring straight down the table at me. "This is unprecedented, but apparently these people, and Detective Valari—" a nod to Jake—"know you and respect your opinion—" She glanced down at a

form on the table to find my name. "—Herbert." Back up at me. "Your relationship with Rinn Ryder might be able to help us and give us some insight into how we can best help her."

"She's been through hell," I said, causing most of the people there to straighten up. "What else can I tell you?"

The gray-haired woman was unfazed. "The father is dead, the mother's whereabouts are unknown, the sister is serving a lengthy prison term. The grandmother is alive but in a rehab hospital and unable to care for Rinn, and even if she were, it's doubtful it would be allowed, since the woman is facing criminal charges of her own. Rinn's records from her old school in Westfleet indicate sporadic attendance, indifferent academic performance, not to mention a string of both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. The offenses range from inappropriate language to vandalism—writing on desks, lockers, and the like. She was also involved in several school fights. Her old school did do testing on her in grade six and found, at that time, no significant deficiencies in her ability to learn; her reading, writing, math skills are all where they should be. The results of her psychological tests are more grim, and we will go over them after we hear from Herbert and he is dismissed. We plan to do more testing, of course, but that takes time." She glanced up at the people around her. "So we will reconvene when that testing is completed. But for now it's important to know that



Rinn has no juvenile criminal record, and that's a definite plus. So it is our belief . . ." Another glance at the large group there. ". . . that Rinn-Alice Ryder can be salvaged." She looked back at me. "Which is why you have been asked to sit in for part of this meeting."

"Rinn can be salvaged?" Everyone there had to have heard the irony in my voice. I looked across the table at a glum-looking Jake. "I thought you salvaged boats, not people."

I knew Jake wanted to speak then, or hit me off the top of my head, but it was Dr. Earle who did it instead. "Herbie, if you aren't here to help Rinn, then you can leave. I approached these people with the idea of including you because we have very little to go on at this time. But if you plan to be irreverent and unhelpful, you're going back to class. What do you say?"

"I say I'm sorry," I had admitted. "I really . . . want to help Rinn."

But what I hadn't counted on was this: how terribly frustrating it would be to try to help someone who did such a poor job at being helped. I'd spent two hours working with Rinn on possessive pronouns—not a subject I thought was particularly taxing—and this was what I'd gotten for my efforts.

There was a sudden coughing sound from the bathroom, and I looked up again.

"Hey, Rinn." I walked to the bathroom door, tapped on it with my knuckles. "You all right? Are you sick? I can go get Mrs. McAfee."

There were footsteps, then the door opened a crack, widened some

more, and a face peered out: a tight, hard, knotted face with a small pointed chin, a narrow jaw, and bright dark-blue eyes. Wet eyes.

"Rinn." I grabbed the door and pushed it open.

"I told you to go away!" she shouted at me. "Didn't you hear me say I didn't want you to see me this way?"

"You've been crying."

For a moment all I could think of was the English paper, the F, and though I was upset that all my efforts, and hers, had been wasted, it wasn't worth being this upset. No grade was.

"Of course I'm crying," she snapped. "I lost my job. Now go away." She tried to close the door on my hand, but I blocked it, pushed it open. She had evidently been sitting in there crying. There were towels on the floor, a bottle of aspirin on the edge of the sink.

"You lost your job? What happened?"

"I just lost it." She pushed past me, swiping me in the chest as she did. She wasn't very big, but she had a good punch. Turning in the center of her small bedroom, she confronted me. "That's all."

"There's got to be a reason." I guess my reaction was a bit too strong.

"They don't like me, that's the reason." On her face was an absolutely snarled-up expression. She wasn't a bad-looking girl, but when she got like this . . .

"Rinn, that's no reason to fire you. Have you told the McAfees?"

"No, why should I?" she said. "Why should those people care? It's



just an after-school job, six hours a week. Like I make a lot of money or something." She went over to her bed, sat down on the edge of it. "I mean, the Christmas House; they buy cheap stuff and sell it for five, six times what it's worth. I put out ornaments, stupid-looking reindeer made in Taiwan or someplace, and the owner says to mark them six bucks each. I saw the crate they came in—they had me working in Receiving—and it said, 'Suggested retail value: a dollar and half.' He's a crook."

"He's a businessman."

"I hated it anyhow. All the customers so happy and cheery and la-di-dah, spending money on crap. I'm glad I don't work there any more." And with that she sprawled out on her bed, hands under her head, staring at the ceiling.

"I think you do care, Rinn." I rubbed the center of my chest where she'd hit me. "Or you wouldn't be in the bathroom crying."

"You know what, Herbie Sawyer, I hate you, too. Why don't you go home to your nice little house and your nice little mother, who's probably making you a nice little dinner right about now. Just—" she flipped over on her side, grabbing her pillow—"go home and get the hell out of my life."

I sat down at the desk. "If you lost your job because they didn't like you, and you didn't like them, and you hated the job—"

"I hate everything and everyone."

"Okay, then you wouldn't be upset and you are upset."

She turned over to look at me, a sneer on her face.

"You are upset," I repeated.

"Look . . ." She sat up, swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She was dressed as she usually was: worn bluejeans, faded jeans shirt, men's work boots. Despite the state allowance she now got for clothes, she hadn't spent a dime on herself. The McAfees had put the money into an account for her; she wouldn't touch it.

"I'm looking."

"You know . . ." She was suddenly on the verge of tears again; time for any kind and supportive person to back off, I suppose. I didn't. "Mr. McAfee—" she said the name with contempt—"he found your name in the newspaper. Term One Freshman Honor Roll. Big deal. He showed it to me. I said to him, so what? Like I care. Now I've got to go tell him . . . damn." This was followed by a string of other less wholesome epithets, but I didn't move, just sat quietly, waiting for her to finish. Then: "Mrs. Spotsworth, she's the manager of the shop, she said she wouldn't call the school if I—" Her eyes started to well up. "Damn, Herbie, what am I going to do? They said they wouldn't tell the school or the McAfees, but I don't believe them."

"Tell them what?"

"They say I've been stealing from them. Mrs. Spotsworth told Mr. Fox, the store's owner, and he believed her so he fired me."

"Did you steal from them?"

"I hate you," she said.

"I know that," I said back.

"No. What would I want that they have? Crummy cheap ornaments they pretend are handmade

from Austria or someplace and I know they're from Taiwan? Stuffed animals. Toys. And collectibles, just another name for fancy junk."

I leaned forward in the chair. "What did they say you took, Rinn?"

"A couple of prisms. You hang them in windows or on Christmas trees." Her voice got lower, softened. "They're beautiful, really. I mean, they're not cheap or anything. Longer than my hand." She held her hand out. "Triangular-shaped. A few are missing, and I helped unpack them." She shook her head.

"A customer might have taken them. Hey, look, if you didn't take them and they say you did, they can get in trouble, Rinn. Let me talk to Jake."

"But they never made it to the sales floor, Herbie! I had them out to go. Some were kind of sandy and I was cleaning them off. We were going to put them on the big tree, in the front window of the store. And some others in the other window, facing the water where the sun goes down. It would have looked real pretty, not like some of the artificial snow and angels and other crappy stuff they have. But I didn't take them. Why would I take them?"

"I don't know. Maybe after school tomorrow we can go down there, talk to Mr. Fox and the manager. Maybe I can look around..."

"Who do you think you are, some amateur detective?" she snarled suddenly. "You can't help me. I got fired and that's that, and with any luck they'll just leave me alone and not tell the school or anyone else.

They said they'd file a police complaint if I didn't return the prisms, but I don't have them."

"Well, you've got to tell the McAfees."

"I hate the McAfees."

"You know, you've got a real attitude problem. They want to help you, but you don't make it easy."

"Whoever made it easy for me?" she charged. "They took everything my grandmother owned, you know. The card shop we had in Westfleet is gone. The government, they did that, they auctioned off the inventory, her furniture, even her dishes. The furniture was old, a lot of it antiques, and it's all gone! You think I should be happy that I'm stuck in this crummy town, with these . . . people, and these kids I don't even know, that I'm not related to and I don't even want to know? Then they stick me in this crummy school and set me up in this lousy job. I hate everything about it."

"Would you at least let me talk to Jake?"

"No. You can't." Her face tightened up even more than it usually was. She looked like she was going to cry again. "I didn't take the prisms. They can't do anything to me except fire me. I just want to be left alone, okay? Do you mind? Just go away."

"You don't want me to help?" Suddenly I felt quite useless.

"I don't want your help, Herbie Sawyer. I don't want anything from you."

I didn't hear her; headphones on my head too loud, cranked way up,

some group I used to like, couldn't now remember the name of, a CD tucked in the wrong case at the bottom of a pile of comic books I hadn't looked at in a couple of years. So I jumped when my mother tapped me on the shoulder and, smiling, mouthed, "Supper's ready."

She'd been in a better mood lately. She and Jake were attending the Fireman's Christmas Ball a week from tonight. Having dated about a year ago, they'd broken up, now were getting back together again—on a limited basis, that is. "Just a couple of friends," she'd insisted at supper two nights ago. A supper made of clam fritters, chicken parmesan, homemade baked bread, all brought over by Jake, who claimed he'd "made way too much for me, Emily. Know how you like my fritters, and Herbie my chicken parmesan."

Right, I wanted to say. Just two friends. Still, it was good to see my mother's face beaming again, the lift in her step, the lilt in her voice. Even her hair seemed to sparkle when she ran her brush through it. She had thick, dark hair, just like Rinn.

"Not hungry," I said as the group rattled on in my head. English group. I tipped my head forward to my knees, shut my eyes.

"Everything all right?" she asked, lifting away one phone so I could hear her.

"Fine. Save me something for later . . . maybe."

"I'm here, you know," she said, squeezing my shoulder. "If you—"

"Thanks, Mom," I told her, readjusting the headphones.

What can you do when you want to help someone but they refuse all help? Not a heck of a lot. The next day, Friday, was as depressing as any I'd suffered through at Manamesset Junior High. Pressure from everyone: another English paper assigned, a thousand history questions to answer, science project to start thinking about, Spanish and algebra tests coming up. Lunch was cold, the afternoon too long, gym class a boring round of volleyball with a substitute teacher who screamed at everyone all period. It wasn't until after school that I caught up with my eighth grade friend Covey Ralph at his locker.

"So, you seen Rinn? I was down here a couple of times . . ." I said to him.

Indeed I had been, bathroom passes from two teachers, faking a need for a drink of water from a third, anything to get out of class at a time when I might see Rinn. I knew her seat in every class she was in, but every time I passed the room she was supposed to be in, I couldn't find her. I'd even got into trouble with Rinn's science teacher as I stood in the hall whispering to a girl I knew in the same class. The kids were working on an experiment; the teacher must have been in the back of the room. The girl, a petite blonde with too much acne, pretended to need to use the pencil sharpener by the door so she could talk to me.

"Rinn?" the girl had answered. "I don't know, but it's only third period, Herbie. Maybe she's coming in

late." That was when Mrs. Filiades was suddenly in the door.

"Herbert Sawyer, Jr.," she said to me, a fierce but friendly look on her face (amazing how teachers can combine the two), "what are you doing in the eighth grade corridor? Do you have a pass?"

Luckily I did, and now I was facing Covey. His locker was next to Rinn's, one of the reasons I'd recruited him to watch out for her.

"Didn't see her all day, Herbie," he said. "Must be sick, or skipped."

I had things to do later—school newspaper, basketball tryouts, my job (yardwork for a lady who lived a few streets over from me), but after school I skipped it all and beat it off to the McAfees' house to see if I could find Rinn.

No dice, as Covey would have said. The McAfees knew Rinn hadn't gone to school. They'd called her social worker to report it, but then Rinn had shown up at the house half an hour ago, offering no explanation. She'd gone up sullenly to her room, refusing to tell Mrs. McAfee where she'd been, what she'd been doing all day.

Within minutes she'd gone out again. Mrs. McAfee didn't look very happy about all this, but she also looked resigned. She certainly wasn't ready to give up on Rinn, and she told me, "Rinn said something about going over to your house, Herbie. I just called, but there was no answer."

"My mother wouldn't be home yet," I said, thinking as I did. "Look, if I see Rinn, I'll let you know."

Then I was off again.

And arrived just as my mother

was unloading groceries from the back of her new Subaru wagon. She seemed to know immediately what I wanted,

"Herbie, Rinn just showed up. I told her she could wait, that you'd be home in a little while." Her normally vibrant face dropped. Hopefulness and worry: the two emotions my mother could do with such ease. "But she walked off down the road, toward the beach." She also knew what I was going to do. "It looks like it's going to rain. Let me get your slicker."

I followed her onto the back porch, a sack of groceries in either arm. My mother had been less than ecstatic that I'd gotten involved with Rinn Ryder. That deep concern showed all over her face as I set down the bags and she handed me the slicker.

"I'm not happy about this," she said. "Rinn Ryder is a deeply troubled girl, Herbie, more so than you can handle or help. You've already done too much for her, but—"

I was already down the stairs. "Call the McAfees, would you, Mom?" I spun around in our dirt driveway. "Tell them I'll bring Rinn home in a little while."

But how did you help someone who was so far out of reach? How do you offer a hand when the other person isn't interested in grabbing back? Oh, I believed Rinn all right; I believed she'd have to have been out of her mind to steal on her first job, no matter her background, history, past family life, whatever. I also knew she missed her grandmother, odd and conniv-

ing as that old woman could be. Rinn had a lot of excuses to go the wrong way. I just hoped, without being overbearing and without flaunting the supposed good fortune I'd had in life, that I was giving her an excuse to go a different way.

She was right where I thought she'd be, standing on the concrete seawall that flanked Manamasset Beach South. The houses behind her were all summer homes and stood there, dark, quiet, empty, windows with no curtains, porches laden with heavy outdoor furniture tied down with canvas tarps. Summer would come and this would be a lively, energetic place, full of children and dogs, voices and laughter, lawnmowers stirring, boats chugging out in the bay. I loved this beach in summer.

But I also loved it now, even with the gray clouds glooming down over it, threatening rain, snow, or maybe some slippery mixture of both as we often got so near the water.

"Hey, Rinn."

She turned around slowly, dark eyes glowering, face pale, uninterested, remote.

"You weren't in school today," I said jauntily like nothing was wrong. "What's up?"

Her voice was hard, dead, cold. "You are such a jerk. Tell me something I don't know, Herbert."

"I'll tell you what I don't know: I don't know where you were today."

She turned and walked away from me, up across the wide brown and green lawns that ran along the seawall. A row of quiet, darkened houses looked out on the water,

their front street the seawall and the bay. There was one house, the Whites' cottage, where I often sat with my friends in summer. I knew the White kids, and their huge rambling porch was a center for all the kids in the neighborhood, seasonal as well as resident. Rinn and I had sat on that porch before, on the top step under the overhang. No one ever said anything about it, even though the occasional local resident walking a dog would look up our way and frown.

I take that back—there was one old guy who walked his poodles. A week ago he had scowled at us as he tracked across the lawns and said, "Hey, don't you kids know that's private property?"

"Yeah, I do," I'd said back to him, and the man had said nothing else, just walked down to the seawall, though he looked over his shoulder at me once or twice.

Anyhow, that's where Rinn and I sat, on the Whites' top step, and for a moment we were both quiet. You could almost see rain across the bay; the clouds were thick, black, angry. She shivered again. She was wearing a thin cotton sweatshirt with a hood, her usual dark blue jeans, workboots. Her hair wasn't tied back and was blowing wildly around in the wind. She tried to shove it down under the sweatshirt.

"Here." I pulled off my slicker. It was a good one, wool-lined, even the sleeves, with an outer layer of waterproof yellow rayon. She gave me a look but moved over to put it on; when she did, I picked up an odor from her. At first I thought,

she's been smoking, and then I realized it was a sweet smoky scent, either in her hair or on her hands and clothes. I didn't say anything about it. She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs, and sighed loudly.

"Where'd you go today?" I asked.

"Met up with some kids down in Falmouth. Hung out." She shrugged. "Didn't feel like going to school." She turned her head, eyes glaring at me, daring me to refute her.

"Falmouth. Cool."

"You've never skipped school, have you? It's never even entered your little brain to do something so outrageous." She kind of half smiled. "Mr. Perfect. Mr. Herbie-Perfect. In my old school the kids would call you a nerd."

"I'm a nerd in this school, too."

She turned on the step, pulling her legs around. Surprising me, she said, "No, you aren't. They like you, the teachers, the kids. You're kind of popular even. I've never been popular and I never will be; nor will I ever be liked very much." Her eyes grew distant.

"So you just hung out today with some friends?"

"Just some kids. I don't have any friends. I never stay in school long enough to make any. Come here." Suddenly she was right up against me. Seizing my right hand, she turned it over in hers. It was cold; the wind was coming down; the rain was heading our way. "Let me read your future, Herbie, the real future, not the one the Duchess and I used to make up for people." She smiled briefly. This was an allusion

to the life she'd had before coming here, when she and her grandmother—the Duchess—used to tell fortunes, read palms, and, all in all, practice the unique ability to tell lies that were so perfect people would pay to hear them.

She looked down at my hand, cupped in her two small cold ones. "You've got a perfect future, with a perfect life: smart wife, blonde, real pretty; lots of kids, four or five maybe; good job; big house; sturdy sensible car—a Volvo." She paused and grinned. "A nice, normal, sane, and sensible life, that's what you've got ahead of you."

"Sounds boring." Then it occurred to me; she probably found me pretty boring, too.

"Boring is not always so bad." She looked at my hand, then dropped it suddenly, turned away, folding her arms around herself. "Boring is . . ." She laughed softly. "School. Life. Those people . . . the McAfees. I mean what kind of life is it when you spend all your time worrying about someone else's kids? Is that a life?" She frowned.

"The McAfees are good people. I don't know what to tell you."

"You know what I was thinking about just now? About this thing we did in school . . ." She shook her head. "Can't believe I'm saying this. Wow. Anyhow, Mrs. Filiades, you know, the science teacher, she had us all use these glass lenses and these metal holder things—we stuck them on a yardstick, though she insisted it was a 'meter stick.' What's the difference? Anyhow, I made a telescope. Did I tell you?" She turned to look at me, then



away again as quickly. "I could see across the room and then out the windows and . . ." She looked across the bay. "I was somewhere else, Herbie; I could see so far and I wasn't there in that room any more. I'd gotten away. It was a real funny feeling." Her face softened.

Then she abruptly shrugged and frowned. "But hey, a telescope, big deal; my father had telescopes and binoculars . . . I mean, my grandmother did, in her shop. Antiques. We sold a few."

"But you've never made a telescope before."

"Hey, look, I hate school and that's not going to change. And . . . I went to the Christmas House this morning before it opened, and Mrs. Spotsworth, she's not going to change either. I didn't like her, and I was probably going to quit anyhow. She said if I didn't return the 'merchandise' I'd taken by tomorrow, she was going to the police. I'd like to get a gun and put a bullet right through her head."

"Don't say that, Rinn."

"I thought I could say anything I wanted to you."

"You can . . ." I felt my voice kind of break, change. I moved closer to her, shook my head. "I just don't want you to say that." The sweet smell about her was stronger, thicker; it was coming off her breath. I knew what it was, but I still didn't say anything about it.

"I can really upset you, can't I?" she said. "That's kind of funny."

"Rinn, you can stomp all over me if you want," I told her sincerely.

"What? And you'll still be there for me?" Her voice was sarcastic,

her expression incredulous, but then she pulled herself up closer to me and wound her arm through mine. "I don't understand you, you know. I just don't get you at all. I'm not that pretty blonde woman you're going to marry, Herbie. I'm not even close."

"Close enough." I leaned over, kissed her cheek, and, when she turned her head to mine, kissed her again.

So I spent some time with Rinn, and I convinced her to come home with me for a while. My mother was less than happy to see her, but she was polite, made us sandwiches—tunafish for me, hot chicken parmesan for Rinn—then left us alone on our front porch. It was unheated out there and kind of cool, but it was the only place other than my bedroom where Rinn and I could be alone, talk, watch TV. She was quiet most the time, and when I asked her to, she called the McAfees to tell them she was sorry she'd skipped school. Mr. McAfee told her he'd come to pick her up around nine.

"I'm going to do something for you," I told her as I walked her to the back door. My mother was watching the news. The look on her face was tense as we went through the living room, but she was polite when Rinn thanked her for the sandwich.

Mr. McAfee honked his horn from our driveway. By now there was a driving rain coming down and I could tell by Rinn's face that she didn't want to go, but neither did she want to stay with me. "I'm go-

ing to the Christmas House tomorrow—”

“No, I don’t want you—”

“I’m going to talk to your boss; it’s the one thing I can do. Look.” I touched her face gently, made her meet my eyes. “Most adults like me, Rinn. They respond to me pretty well. If I can’t get your job back, maybe I can convince her that you didn’t take any prisms. As you said, what for? I’m going to give it a try.”

“Mrs. Spotsworth isn’t going to be changed by you,” she warned me cynically. “You can be cute and charming all you like, she isn’t going to care.”

“I’ve got work in the morning; I’ll go see her later, maybe . . . right after they close or something. I’m going to do it, Rinn.”

“Do what you want,” she said with a sigh. Her hand was on the door, but before she could leave, I grabbed my slicker from the hook by the door and draped it over her shoulders. When she turned to look at me, I said, “I’ll get the slicker tomorrow.”

**S**aturday. Spent all morning hauling brush, cleaning out sheds, lugging trash, and when I asked if I could quit at three (I’d been doing yardwork all fall for this particular lady), she didn’t give me a hard time. Just handed me a twenty dollar bill and asked if I could work on Sunday next week instead of Saturday. No problem.

Then I was off on my bike to the Christmas House, a thirty minute ride, formulating in my head how I was going to handle this. All the

way there I was going through different possible scenarios:

“If you could give Rinn Ryder a second chance, I know she’ll work real hard for you . . .”

Sounded too much like an out-and-out lie.

“Rinn comes from a real troubled background. If anyone deserves a second chance . . .”

Too much like an appeal for pity.

Thing was, I didn’t have to come up with an opening line after all. Mrs. Spotsworth was on the front porch of the converted Victorian-era residence now known as the Christmas House struggling with an oversized plastic figure with a blinking red nose, two orange eyes, and a long black pipe. To put it bluntly, the poor woman was in danger of being crushed by seven feet of plastic snowman. I dropped my bike near the flagstone walk and rushed up the steps to help her push it upright.

For a few minutes I was holding the thing while she fastened it to its flimsy metal stand, then struggled with an electric cord that had been threaded through one of the front windows. Impatiently, she barked orders inside to someone named Beth to plug it in, would she? There were no introductions between the two of us, no gratitude of any kind even when Mr. Snowman was finally standing tall and blinking for all he was worth.

“Festive enough, I suppose,” she finally said, maybe to me, maybe to no one in particular. She looked at me still standing there, trying to find an opportunity to introduce myself, state my purpose. I think it

was then that I made the mistake of glancing at the window where a glaring orange sign read HELP WANTED.

"Sorry, young man," she said to me, heading for the front door. "I want to fill that position with a girl."

"But can you do that?" I asked, even though a job was the last thing I was interested in. "I mean, isn't that some sort of . . . discrimination?"

She was a woman of about fifty, maybe older, with a pinched, tight face, permed red hair, and a pair of glasses hanging off a long gold chain. Dressed in a red and black suit that she probably thought was fashionable, complete with a 1980's scarf tied in a bow which even I knew was badly dated, she glared at me.

"I can do whatever I like, young man. That is . . ." She looked me up and down, sharp little eyes reminding me of a ferret's. This was not a woman accustomed to being challenged. "If I want to fill a position for a Mrs. Claus, that is." She raised her glasses as if to put them on but didn't. "You might make a passable elf, though. What's your name? How old are you? Well, what are we doing standing out here? Mr. Frosty there looks quite all right. Come in. Come in."

It was as good a way as any to get things done. Within two minutes I was seated in an overstuffed chair before a huge maple desk in a room that probably had once been a small parlor or reading room. I had a clipboard in my lap and was filling out a form as the woman sat be-

hind her desk and regarded me sharply.

But this wasn't what I had intended to do; it wasn't right misleading her this way, so after filling in a few lines, my name, address, age, I leaned forward and put the clipboard on her desk. Just as I did so, the door opened.

"Myra," the man standing there said with something like triumph in his voice. He was short, thin, overdressed: navy blazer, dark pants, and what I think the English call an ascot. His thick black hair was overgreased with gel or hair cream.

He came into the room, a broad and beaming smile on his small face. I'm not a huge guy, but if I'd stood up, I would have dwarfed him.

I remained seated.

"It's just so perfect," the man said in a kind of affected, almost effeminate way. Spreading his small hands, he walked over to her desk. "You've done such a wonderful job, Myra. I mean, the shop looks positively . . . garish, doesn't it?" He gave a quick, curious glance at me. "I mean, isn't that what we're going for? Tackiness on a small town scale? It's what's selling today, isn't it? The plastic pink flamingoes under the tree, and those perfectly, wickedly ugly candles, little trolls dressed as the Wise Men. Wherever did you find them? I must have them in all my shops!"

"I'm glad you're happy, Evan . . . Mr. Fox." A ferretlike pair of eyes moved in my direction, then to the clipboard on the desk.

"For far too long good taste has

been 'de rigueur', so to speak . . ." the man went on, chuckling as though he and Mrs. Spotsworth knew some huge secret that no one else did. "When we string those perfectly hideous prisms in the windows, it'll be perfect. Reminds me of that scene in that dreadful movie, now what was it called?"

"*Pollyanna*," I said.

His eyes were on me. "Yes, yes, so I think it was." He looked back at Mrs. Spotsworth. "Not a bad looking boy, might fill out nicely one of those horrible elf costumes you picked up for a pittance at the costume wholesaler." His tiny feral eyes fell on me again.

"I don't know if . . ." Mrs. Spotsworth came around in front of me, picked up the clipboard, then settling back on the edge of the desk, legs crossed—for Evan Fox's benefit, I hoped—she looked at me. "Herbert Sawyer, Jr. . . ." she read my name, "is here for employment." She frowned down her long, thin nose at me. "Perhaps he's changed his mind?"

"Oh goodness no!" Mr. Fox said, expressing disappointment with two raised hands. "Our Twelve Days of Christmas Sale is going to be absolutely the Ritz!" He was talking to me now. "Of course, it's going to last for twenty-two days, but who's counting?" He gave a shrill little giggle. "All the staff will be in costume: toy soldiers and elves, Mr. and Mrs. Claus—" he gave Mrs. Spotsworth a conspiratorial wink—"which will be played by myself and Mrs. Spotsworth if I can convince her."

Was she blushing? Seemed so.

"And you, young man, would make a perfect . . ." He was studying me intently. "Not an elf, no, no, no . . . oh, Myra, what do you think of this? This young man as one of the three kings: Caspar . . . no, no, no, Balthazar! He's got a certain look, doesn't he? And that hair?" He moved toward me. I felt myself shrink back. "Is that your real color?"

"Evan." Mrs. Spotsworth sighed deeply. "We were going to stay away from any kind of religious theme, have you forgotten? Too—" another sigh—"serious. People buy a dozen cute little reindeer to any one Christmas creche."

"Oh, so true, so true," Evan Fox agreed, smiling at her, and then strangely enough, smiling at me in precisely the same way. "Just you consider the offer, young man. We can always use help this time of year. Now I must run, Myra." He moved toward her as though he were about to kiss her, reconsidered, and, turning away, said, "We have a couple of after-hours customers, did I tell you? They're supposed to be here right at five, and I might need your help. Will you be long—" another glance at me—"here?"

She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "No more than a few minutes."

Then he was gone, and I was left to tell Mrs. Spotsworth the real reason I was there.

Which she took reasonably well, striding back and forth across the room, arms folded across her chest, as I told her the sad little story of Rinn-Alice Ryder and how mistak-

en she—Mrs. Myra Spotsworth—had to be about her.

As I talked, we were interrupted once or twice by employees leaving, an attractive blonde girl, another with a round but friendly freckled face.

“So,” I finally finished up, “I’ve known Rinn for a while, ma’am, and I don’t think she’d jeopardize a job like this one, a job that was so important to her and that she was so happy to get, by stealing a few prisms from you.”

She stood for a minute at one of the windows. Suddenly a pair of plastic candles in the window blinked on, probably set on a timer. She glanced at them, then spun around on me with a rather dramatic flourish.

“And especially since she’s spoken so highly of you,” I added for good measure. “Rinn’s not the kind of girl to let down the people she respects and admires.”

“So you really came down here,” she said, tapping one patent-leather shoe on the richly carpeted floor, “to make an appeal for your girlfriend? How noble of you, Herbert. But how foolish and pointless, too. I know for certain that Rinn *did* steal at least two, maybe more, forty dollar glass prisms. I counted them myself. The packing crate indicated there were thirty-three seven inch triangular cut-glass decorative prisms inside. Imported from a glass wholesaler. She claimed two arrived broken, but I checked myself; they all were fine, and now two are missing, the two Rinn put in her purse—”

“Rinn doesn’t carry a purse.”

“Knapsack! Backpack!” she shot back, irritated. “Whatever young girls carry around on their backs these days! Another girl saw her!”

“She did mention the broken ones,” I said softly. “Are you sure—”

“I told you, none were broken. I checked myself! And even if they were, do you think we just hand out broken merchandise to the employees? They’d go around breaking things just to get them for free, now wouldn’t they? What a ridiculous idea! If merchandise arrives broken, we notify the supplier and arrange for an exchange, refund or credit on our next order!”

“Then I’m sorry . . .” I rose, aware her head reared back to look at me as I did.

“Maybe you would make a good elf,” she said. “A rather tall elf. We could also use a stock boy, if you’re interested.”

“No, just . . . thanks for your time” were my final words before I went out.

There was no answer at the McAfees. The family van was missing from the driveway, and just as I figured they’d all gone out—Saturday night shopping, movie, pizza, whatever—the door pushed open slightly when I knocked again. It was dark on the porch, and the interior lights over the kitchen sink were on. I stepped in, asking loudly if anyone were home. Getting no answer, I headed for the stairs up to Rinn’s room.

Where I also called, “Rinn? You here? Rinn . . .” and gently pushed open the door at the top of the stairs. The scent was overwhelming

and unmistakable. I stepped into her room; it was empty. The door to the bathroom was ajar, and I stepped in. The door leading into the other bedroom, the one belonging to the McAfee's youngest daughter, was also open.

For a moment I wondered if their daughter were home, how she'd take finding a strange kid in her bathroom. I realized then I had no business walking around in someone else's room—or house—like this. I had turned to go when I caught something out of the corner of my eye and turned back around.

There was light falling across the tiles of the bathroom floor, not ordinary light but a multicolored spray of light known as a full spectrum. It was like a small rainbow stretching irregularly across the floor, a rainbow made up of bars of red, orange, yellow . . .

Its source was coming from the McAfees' daughter's bedroom. I walked across the small bathroom. On a small dresser across the room were two triangular bars, each about seven inches long, standing on end. One was set directly in the path of a brightly lit lamp, the light from which was shining through the glass prism.

"Who's there?" an anxious voice asked. I heard the other bathroom door open and slam against the wall. Rinn was standing in the doorway looking at me, at the pair of prisms atop the dresser, then back at me. Immediately she spun around, disappeared back into her bedroom.

"Rinn!"

She wasn't going to run away;

no, she had decided to stand in the middle of her room, scowling eyes on me. She stank, no, she reeked of marijuana.

"You didn't say you were coming back tonight."

"Are you alone?"

"They took the boys to a movie," she snapped. "So, yes, I'm alone. What about it?"

"You did take two prisms from the Christmas House. You did."

I must have looked absolutely stupid standing there stating the obvious because Rinn's response was, "Oh, aren't you clever. Aren't you the smartest thing? Figure that out all by yourself, did you?"

"You lied to me."

"If you could just see your face, Mr. Perfect . . ." She tried to laugh, failed, turned away from me with a pretense at indifference, callousness, maybe even cowardice.

"Why?"

"Why what?" She spun around, face angry, wild, turning all the blame back onto me. "It's all your fault, you know. You come in here without knocking, you just barge in? I could . . . you could be arrested for doing that, couldn't you? For trespassing?"

"You took Mrs. Spotsworth's—no, Mr. Fox's prisms, Rinn. Forty dollars apiece. You took them, what for? What for?"

"Because I'm not like you, Herbert Sawyer!" she shouted at me. "I'm not Mister Perfect, Mister Wouldn't-say-crap-with-a-mouth-full-of-it! I'm not you!"

"But why did you lie . . . to me?"

Another sneer; another contemptuous shake of her head. "You look



like you're going to cry. People don't let you down very often, do they? I bet—" she sauntered toward me cockily "—I bet I'm just about the worst person you've ever met, aren't I? You, so perfect, Herbie, so clean, and me . . . I bet I'm just about the dirtiest thing you've ever put your hands on, right?"

"You lied to me, Rinn."

"So what?" she nearly screamed. "Is that all you can say to me? So I lied to you. So big—" another explosive epithet "—deal! This is how I am, Herbie Sawyer. *I lie*. My whole family lies. You should be surprised? That's how we get along in this world, it's how we survive! My father, you ought to have seen what he'd do. He'd take an ordinary trunk, mark it up good, scratch it, break one of the hinges, and guess what? He's got a four-hundred-year-old sea chest that'll sell to some stupid tourist for a thousand bucks! That's how *we* got along! And that's how I—" she spun around and away from me, arms wrapped around her middle, shoulders rising and falling rapidly "—get along."

"You don't understand," I told her. "I asked why you lied—to me."

"You jerk. And if I told you the truth, what would you have done? Run to your mother, your cop friend? Turned me in? I asked her . . ." For a moment her entire face looked like it could melt; her lips trembled. "I asked her, Herbie, if I could have just one of the broken ones, just one, but she said no. She wouldn't even give me a broken one. Why not?"

For several minutes I'd been so intent on Rinn, on what she'd done,

that I barely was aware of myself, of what I was feeling.

"Myra Spotsworth," she sneered. "Her and Mr. Fox and their sneaky little affair. Like no one knows. She's a bitch. I hate her. I hate you, too, for doing this to me. Why can't you knock on the door like a normal person?"

I walked around her to the desk, where there were a few cigarette papers, a small pile of crumpled leaves, dark grayish-green and brittle.

"You're smoking this, too. Where did you get it?"

"A kid I know." Suddenly her voice changed. "You want some?"

"I want you to flush it down the toilet," I said very matter-of-factly. "And then tomorrow I want you to return those two prisms to Mrs. Spotsworth. I'll go with you."

"You are such a . . ." She called me a rather choice name. I moved so I was between her and the desk. "Get out of my way," she said. "Get out of my way and get the—" another good one "—out of my life."

That was when I realized what I was feeling, just as I grabbed hold of her. She struggled briefly, but I didn't let go and she was much too small. I could feel the bones of her arms through her skin.

"Let me go or I'll scream, Herbie," she said, trying her best to be belligerent.

"The McAfees aren't here. No one will hear you. So go ahead, scream."

It was amazing, the swift transformation in her, the way her resistance changed to pliancy, the scorn on her face to chagrin and regret. But I didn't let her go, and even as

she spoke I became shockingly aware what I was capable of. Rinn wasn't weak, but she was small and, suddenly, totally at my mercy.

More shockingly, it didn't bother or upset me either. In that moment I had complete and total control over her, and I didn't dislike it.

"I won't scream," she said, her voice dipping low. She looked up at me through thick, dark lashes. "Because you are right, Herbie." She tried to move but, failing, stopped, grew even limper in my grip. "We are alone. They aren't expected back until late, so—" A coy glance across the room, to her bed. "Whatever you want to do," she said suggestively. "If you'll just promise not to tell, not to turn me in."

I practically threw her away from me, realizing that no matter what I'd felt just seconds earlier, this at least did not surprise me: I could not hurt her. No matter how much she compromised herself, no matter how much she used me.

"I'll take them back myself. Tomorrow." I walked away from her.

She flung herself in front of me, between me and the bathroom door.

"Why?" she shouted. "Why is it so . . . so . . ." a new string of epithets "important that you, that I, that everyone always does the right thing?"

"You disgust me, Rinn," I said straight to her face. "Now get out of my way."

"I disgust you?" She refused to move. "I didn't disgust you much yesterday, did I? When you were feeling me up out on the Whites' porch?"

I pushed her away. She didn't fight me, but she did stand cursing and shouting at me as I neatly wrapped the two heavy prisms in some tissues I took from the bathroom. Then I grabbed my slicker off the hook by her door and left.

Suffice it to say, I didn't sleep much that night. I stared at the ceiling a lot and at the two wrapped prisms on my dresser. What was the point, anyhow? What did two pieces of cut glass really mean? Mrs. Spotsworth, Mr. Fox, they probably did mark them up exorbitantly, charging four or five times what they paid for them. And they were just pieces of glass at that. What kind of people were they that a piece of merchandise made of two of the earth's most common elements, silicon and oxygen, mattered more than a young girl's self-worth?

Now I was taking the line that Rinn was trying to teach me: that being a self-made victim gave her—or anyone else—the right to make mistakes and fix blame on the rest of us.

Us, the vast majority of people who struggled and fell and got back up, always doggedly trying to do the right thing, no matter how difficult or damning the right thing often was.

After tossing and turning for hours, I got up, showered, dressed, and knew what I was going to do: leave the prisms on the front step of the Christmas House. No note, no explanation. Just give them back. Then try to forget the whole stupid thing.

It was a forty-five minute ride in the early morning cold. Fog was rolling in across the water. A typical December morning on Cape Cod just as the sun was struggling to rise. No one about. Even the early Sunday churchgoers hadn't stirred yet. Just the way I wanted it as I rode my bike into town to the Christmas House.

A Christmas House lit up not by the shiny ornaments on the tree in the window, the blinking candles on the windowsills, or the snowman on the front porch, but by the flashing blue lights of a half dozen police cruisers. As I stood there watching, a dark van pulled up with the words COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER painted on the side.

The sensible, normal thing to do would have been to turn my bike around, pedal back home . . .

Instead I crossed the street, threw my bike against the curb, and headed for the nearest familiar face there, Officer Fred Andersen, the dispatch officer for the Manamasset police force. He was stretching yellow police tape across the front steps and porch of the store.

"Hey, Fred." I barely remembered I had my backpack slung over one shoulder. "What's going on?"

There was a rush of people going in and out, officers in uniform and heavy jackets, others in plainclothes, some carrying cameras and equipment, but no sign of Jake or his trademark red Firebird. No one seemed to notice me just yet, standing there talking to Fred.

"Not good, Herbie," Fred said, watching the officers and the police photographers go by. "Two people

were shot in there last night. The man's dead." He dropped his voice, spun the tape around a column on the porch as a couple of state troopers went in. One of them frowned Fred's way but said nothing. "Woman was shot, too; she's in pretty bad shape. They took her away in an ambulance." He leaned in close to me. "It was the husband who called in, took the call myself. Said his wife never showed up last night, said maybe she was playing a little hanky-panky with the guy who owns the store." He looked at me meaningfully as though I were some stupid little kid who had no idea what he was getting at. "Poor guy. Bullet between the eyes. I'd say the husband is the prime suspect, wouldn't you?"

"You mean Mr. Fox," I asked, taking this all in, "is dead?"

"That's the guy!" Fred said almost triumphantly. Then, cocking his head, "How do you know—"

Suddenly Fred was cut off. "Hey you, kid? What are you doing here?" A man in an expensive dark suit was standing in the open door. He was sucking on a candy cane. "You work here, you're kind of early, aren't you?" He came down the steps toward me, a surly-looking guy, probably police but the kind who acted like wearing a police uniform was an insult. "What's your name?"

I think I kind of froze. I just looked at the guy, and Fred was no help. In fact he was very quick to walk away from me and make a big production of winding the rest of the yellow tape around the porch.

"Herbie. Herbert Sawyer, Jr. Mrs.

Spotsworth and Mr. Fox, what happened to them?"

The surly guy's eyebrows rose, and he glanced at Fred, who stepped off the porch and found some bushes to wind his yellow tape through.

"Come on in, Herbert Sawyer, Jr.," the man said.

I obediently followed.

I was asked—ordered—to have a seat in the store between the racks of gaudy Christmas knickknacks and the displays of garland, tinsel, and plastic poinsettias. While the commotion increased, men and women in and out, arguing, talking, notebooks flapping, I watched as a man I knew, the medical examiner in his fishing cap and fur-collared jacket, came out of the back of the store. He noticed me and gave me a funny look but didn't stop, just walked on.

"How the hell do I know where Valari is?" I heard someone shout across the store from the vicinity of Mrs. Spotsworth's office. I just sat tight, wondering how and when and why they would ask me to open my backpack and how I could refuse. Could I request a lawyer?

And what did I tell them about Rinn? And her saying to me yesterday that she'd like to put a bullet through Mrs. Spotsworth's head?

The surly man in the expensive dark suit was walking across the display area toward me, talking to a younger man in a poorer quality suit—his pants were too short, his shirt collar had a coffee stain on it.

"Just find him," Mr. Well-Dressed was saying to the second man. "Try his place again, and how about that woman he's seeing? The good-looking one, works at the local school super's office? Maybe he slept over at her place. Can't think of her name." He started snapping his fingers. "Emma. Emily . . ."

"Emily Sawyer," I said. Both men looked at me. "Emily Sawyer. She's my mother."

The voices reached me even down the hall: "I don't care if you do know the kid, can vouch for him on a—" the word again—"stack of Bibles. His name is on an employee application found on the victim's desk. Exhibit A, Jake. The kid was here yesterday afternoon, applying for a job. Myra Spotsworth even wrote down the time he arrived, four forty-five, fifteen minutes before this place closes up. The medical examiner tentatively places the time of Evan Fox's death at sometime between five and six, six thirty last night. I want to question that kid myself."

I banged my head back against the wall. They'd moved me; I was sitting in what had probably once been a pantry and now was a kind of makeshift kitchen with a coffee-pot and small refrigerator. Two police officers were making coffee and keeping an eye on me.

Twenty minutes ago an extremely agitated Jake Valari, detective sergeant on the Manamesset police force, had gotten done questioning me.

"Tell me again what you're doing here," Jake had said, eyeing me

with all the patience he could muster. Beside me on the narrow counter next to the employees' coffeepot were the two prisms I'd been so intent on returning for Rinn. "And why you had those in your backpack."

"I told you," I'd said with equal but forced patience. I hadn't wanted to open the backpack, but there was no way, nor had I any reason, to refuse Jake. "I'm bringing them back for a friend, Jake, a friend who lifted them from the store. The kid feels real guilty about stealing them, so he asked if I'd take them back."

"Him," Jake had said to me with deadly irony. "Herbie, those prisms weren't even on the sales floor yet. They were taken out of the back room, from Receiving and Shipping. Come on." He'd leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees, pleading with me. "Tell me the truth, Herbie. Is Rinn Ryder mixed up in this somehow?"

No, I'd thought. No, Rinn's not a . . . okay, she's a liar and a thief. I granted him that. But she's not . . .

I'd shaken my head, refused to meet his eyes, to answer him. Jake Valari was a big man, robust, intimidating just by his physical presence, and though that might have worked on a dozen other kids, I knew him too well. I wasn't talking, and there was no way he was going to make me talk.

Because Rinn hadn't done this. Rinn was a crazy, mixed-up girl, but she wasn't a murderer.

"Herbie, a man's dead, shot point-blank in the face. A woman is struggling to survive. *You* were one of

the last people to see her, Mrs. Myra Spotsworth. Don't lie to me about that. We have your employee application; it was found on her desk. It's your handwriting; your fingerprints are probably all over the clipboard it was attached to, not to mention the chair you probably were sitting in—"

"Okay," I'd interrupted sharply. "Okay, I was here. I won't deny that. I came to apply for a job, and then . . ." I shrugged, and as I did, my head had whirled; I started to feel sick. "I changed my mind."

"Let's say that's why you were here" was his sorry, disbelieving response. "But why this morning? Christ, Herbie, it's not even seven A.M., and you show up? Why the hell is that? With these?" He picked up one of the two prisms, and as he did, the rising sun behind him flashed through it, sending an arc of color across the pale walls of the tiny room.

"I told you—" I'd finally been able to meet his stare—"I was returning them for a friend."

With disgust Jake had risen and walked off, telling the two officers there, "Keep an eye on him. He goes nowhere."

They all moved aside for me, men and women with notebooks, collection bags, cameras, fingerprint kits, and watched me as I stepped into the doorway of a room I'd never been in before.

"Not quite official procedure, Valari," someone remarked.

And another, Mr. Well-Dressed: "This has got to be the most asinine—"

Jake snarled at him, "Shut up, Mack, will you, for Christ' sake."

A woman moved aside for me; another with two glassine bags in hand stepped away, and I was looking into what must have been the shipping and receiving room, where Rinn had been assigned to unpack the new merchandise. There was a long low table with packing crates set on it, some open, some apparently untouched. Shelves lined three walls. Most of the boxes on them looked untouched, too.

In one corner was a rough outline on the floor in black marker, done for my benefit, no doubt, though I'd needed no reminder. The ancient hardwood floor had never been meant to look like this, splashed with blood. Mr. Evan Fox's body had been found there. An officer with a large camera stepped away from it so I could have a better view.

"She was found over there." Jake was at my shoulder, pointing out another marked area across the room. "She got roughed up pretty bad. Broken nose. Face was a mess. Then she was shot." A pause intended for my benefit. "We could show you pictures."

I could feel myself start to shake.

"I don't suppose the ones who did it expected her to survive. But she did. Barely," Jake went on, his voice flat, cold. "So, do you want to talk about it now?"

I started to turn toward him, and as I did, I saw a sparkle of color on the floor, then another. The sun was shining dimly through a single narrow window above a door. It was an outside door now covered with white fingerprint powder.

"Pieces of glass," someone explained to me, a woman with a collection bag in her hands. She looked apologetically at Jake, then back at me. "From prisms. Shattered. Someone broke them all, on the table. There was glass everywhere. We cleaned most of it up; otherwise we wouldn't have been able to work in here."

I turned away from Jake, moved to enter the room, felt Jake's hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

"I won't touch anything," I told him, and he let me go.

I walked over to the table, the woman with me. She touched one of the cardboard crates. A mailing label on the outside of it read: CHRISTMAS HOUSE, SUNSET AVENUE, MANAMESSET, MA. The return address was written in a different language.

"From Holland. That's Dutch," she said to the question on my face. "Says: FRAGILE. GLASS. We also found the packing slip. It held prisms." She glanced back at Jake, as though uncertain how much to say.

I swallowed, realizing that there was still glass left on the table: shards of glass, plus a few fragments here and there on the floor, in the corners. I looked in the crate again; there was something else in there. I looked at the woman; she had a plain, flat face but very expressive, intelligent eyes. Once more she read my question.

"Sand. That's sand in there."

Suddenly she and I were reading each other's eyes, each other's questions.

"Yes, I wonder, too," she said to



me. "It might be unimportant; still, why would anyone pack prisms with sand? Sand is abrasive; it scratches glass."

"Maybe the sand wasn't meant to be in the crate. Maybe it—" I looked down at the table, aware that everyone in that room and those looking into the room were watching us, listening.

I started to look around, finding little fragments of glass, corners of prisms, slivers everywhere, and then I saw it against the wall, one piece of glass a little different from the others. I walked forward and indicated it. Suddenly the woman was there with me, stooping down and lifting it gingerly into a latex-gloved hand.

It was different; a piece not of a prism but something else. It was the corner of something that had indeed been triangular-shaped but not solid. It was the edge of something hollow. A little box. A glass box. A little box in the shape of a prism.

I looked at the woman, but she shook her head; she had come only so far with me. She didn't see, but suddenly I did.

"Hell, this is getting us nowhere!" someone shouted. "Theatrics! The kid knows something. Son of your lady friend or not, get him out of here and make him talk. Call his mother!"

"What does it mean?" the woman asked me, her voice almost a whisper. She had seen the change in my face as awareness came over it.

For a moment I looked at her. She was in her twenties, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, an at-

tractive, fairly young woman. Perhaps this was her first case.

Then I thought of what I knew, that she and no one else did:

Rinn saying, "I asked her, Herbie, if I could have just one of the broken ones, just one, but she said no. She wouldn't even give me a broken one."

And Mrs. Spotsworth last night telling me in no uncertain terms, "She claimed two of the prisms arrived broken, but I checked myself. They all were fine, and now two are missing."

"I don't know," I said to the young woman, lying to her.

I was put back in the small kitchen and told to wait while my mother was contacted. Mr. Well-Dressed, (who turned out to be from the county D.A.'s office; big deal, I wasn't impressed) said to me, "You might think about getting a lawyer, too. You just know too much, kid." To a sullen and obviously disappointed Jake, who hadn't said a word to me in the last ten minutes, the man added, "Get him to talk, Jake, for his own good."

Perhaps Jake had thought my seeing where Evan Fox's body had been found would motivate me to open up. He was wrong.

Now Jake was silent as the guy went on. "And I want every employee who works for this place brought in and questioned, including the girl who was just let go." He had a list in one hand, a new candy cane in the other. "This Rinn-Alice Ryder. Ryder. Ryder . . . where do I know that name? It's not the same family . . ."

"We've already contacted her foster family," Jake replied, for my benefit, again. "I sent two officers over to the house. But she's gone. Her room's emptied out. It looks like she stuffed some clothes in a duffel bag and took off."

I leaned forward, head in my hands. I felt like I was going to be sick. Jake saw and, pushing past Mr. Well-Dressed, ordered one of the police officers there to "take him to the bathroom."

Rinn's not a murderer, I thought as I splashed cold water on my face, stared at myself in the mirror. I moved to the door; the police officer, a burly guy who looked like he bench-pressed Shetland ponies for fun, was staring at me.

"Can I have like . . . two minutes of privacy?" I asked.

He looked me up and down. I must have seemed pretty pathetic from his perspective: small and pale and relatively puny. He nodded, reached in to shut the door for me.

Stepping up on the antique sink, I grabbed hold of the latch on the small, old fashioned window and pulled it open. I climbed up and out, tumbling into the dying sunlight and the falling snow.

I had no jacket; it was left back at the Christmas House, and no bike either. It had been moved from the bushes I'd tossed it in and was now in the parking lot next to two police cruisers. Across the road was a doughnut shop, a dry cleaner's, and a gas station with a beat-up black pickup truck and an old man

pumping his own gas. He was staring over this way, frowning at the cruisers, the state police van, the local cable TV station setting up its satellite truck.

I didn't give the Christmas House a backward glance as I hot-footed it across the street to flag down my old friend, a man I used to do odd jobs for, Mr. Hornton.

"What did you say was going on over there?" Mr. Hornton asked for about the eleventh time as he pulled into my driveway.

"Robbery. Murder. Something," I said, reaching out, putting my hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. "Thanks, Mr. Hornton." I climbed out of the cab, dashed up to my door.

Only to be greeted by a frightened, pale-faced woman, my mother. "Herbie! What's going on?" I was already past her. "Jake just called. He said if you showed up here I wasn't to let you leave!"

I pulled my last year's jacket from the front hall closet, then racing through the kitchen spotted something lying on the counter, stuffed it in my pocket, and whirled around to confront my terrified mother.

"Herbie, Jake said that Mr. Fox, the owner of the Christmas House, is dead, and the manager was shot. Herbie? He told me to call if you came home."

For a moment something flashed through my mind: if Rinn . . .

She'd have a gun, then, wouldn't she?

But where would she have gotten a gun?

Her father. I swallowed everything: doubts, fears, delusions. "I'll be okay," I told her. "I'm going to get Rinn."

"No!" she shouted.

I spun around her, shaking my head. "Give me twenty minutes, Mom, before you call Jake. Twenty minutes." Then I was out the door.

I knew where the key was. We all did. Under the faucet in the shower outside the Whites' cottage. But when I searched around with my hand, I found no key. I looked up at the side of the house, knew she was in there, knew she was probably scared more than she'd ever admit. Even to me.

So much armor. So much pain. I paused on the top step, did what I had to do, then pushed the door. It gave. She hadn't even relocked it.

But why would she need to? Who knew where she was now except for me?

And who else knew what was in the prism box? Packed in the glass with the sand to give it the needed extra weight. Oh yes, sand would scratch, eventually destroy, a cut-glass prism or a glass box camouflaged to look like a prism. But sand would never touch a diamond.

Or diamonds.

"Rinn."

She was sitting curled up on the Whites' sofa, quilt wrapped around her. It was cold in there in December, no heat, no electric power. But she had made tea on the gas stove; I could smell it in the mug on the glass coffee table by her side.

"You are relentless. Do you know what the word means?" she said.

"What are you doing, Rinn?" I asked as I walked into the Whites' huge living room—it ran nearly the length of the house. Dining room in the back, kitchen beside it. Open-raftered, cathedral ceiling; beautiful cut-glass globe lights hanging from giant wooden fans; fieldstone hearth. But for all its beauty, it was cold.

Cold as the glare in her eyes. Cold as the way she stood up slowly, unfolding herself from the quilt.

"I'm not going back. Not to the McAfees, not to school. I decided last night after you left." She paused; was that a plea in her voice? "You've got to let me do it, Herbie. I can't stay here. I don't fit."

"Where you going?"

"New York?" A thin smile. "My dad . . . had friends there. I can start new. I can have a real life, Herbie. Please don't try to convince me otherwise."

"What will you live on, Rinn?"

The smile got broader. Her eyes even seemed to sparkle. She came across the living room, the quilt falling from her shoulders. "Something happened. I would have told you. I would have shared it with you . . ."

"You can tell me anything, Rinn."

"Come here, then." She seized my hand and pulled me across the room to the windows overlooking the porch, the sea, the massive gray clouds. There was a small game table set there, an expensive one inlaid with ivory and teak, an antique. She sat me down opposite her and, in the dim light, withdrew from her pants pocket a long, triangular . . . glass box. She set it

down and looked up at me with excitement in her blue eyes. With a small penknife she pried the top of the little box off. Then she lifted the box, and across the white and brown squares of the table poured ...

Small prisms. Shiny prisms. Catching what small light came in from the gray skies outside. Diamonds. A dozen or more, of different shades, most white but some pale yellow, others a pale lavender blue. Large diamonds. Small diamonds. And all sizes in between.

A fortune in diamonds.

"You see, Herbie? If I go to New York, I can get in touch with some of my father's friends. They'll help me. I can even send back money, help my grandmother, buy back our shop. Oh, Herbie, don't stop me. Please."

"Rinn, did you know—" I leaned over the table, touched her hand as it played with a large blue diamond worth perhaps more than my mother would make in her whole life. "Mrs. Spotsworth and Mr. Fox ..."

Her dark blue eyes glowered up at me; I saw the swift change come over her, the regret at sharing this with me. Like an animal caught in a car's headlights, she was frozen but poised to dash away ...

"They were shot last night. Mr. Fox is dead. Mrs. Spotsworth might not make it. Someone went through the shipment of prisms in the back room, shattered every one, including one like this. They only found the one, Rinn, and they must know there were two. The police are there now, at the Christmas House."

Please say something, I begged inside, something that proves to me there's a human being sitting across this table from me, not some wild and selfish animal that's ready to tear my eyes out and bolt out of here at the first chance.

"That's too bad," she whispered. "But—" She shook her head, looked down at the diamonds.

"But you can't do this," I went on. "You can't."

"I didn't know." She looked up at me. "Herbie, that's terrible, but I had nothing to do with it. I took this one to see why it wouldn't work; it was broken. It wouldn't bend the light right. It was solid, like it was opaque ... and then I noticed it could be opened and that's where the sand was from; there was a little crack in the side." There was absolute wonder in her eyes but something else, too. Something I couldn't read, something distant and unfocused. "I can go to New York," she was saying softly. "My dad had friends ..."

"Yeah, fences and pawnbrokers, thieves and people who'll slice your throat once they know what you're carrying, Rinn."

"No, no, I have it all figured out!" she said excitedly. "I'll give them only one or two at a time, and I can even go to legitimate dealers, tell them these are part of an inheritance." Her voice started to drop. "Or something."

"Won't work, Rinn. You're smart enough to know that. You've got to come with me, go to Jake, turn these in. All you stole were what you thought were ordinary glass prisms, but—"

"No!" She was on her feet. "This is my chance, Herbie! When will I ever—when will I ever get—" she shook her head wildly, black hair flying in her face—"another one?"

"You can't run, Rinn, not from the police and not from the people who hid these—" I nodded at the little stones on the tabletop—"in a crate with thirty-one prisms. You can't do it."

"I hate you, Herbie Sawyer. I could walk out right now and you couldn't stop me."

I saw the flashing blue lights; they were already coming across the wide lawns between here and the seawall and the bay. I pulled my mother's cell phone from my pocket and put it on the antique table.

"Rinn, I already have."

I lied for her. She sat and she listened as I did, as I told Jake that she had insisted I call him. She sat with her arms around her middle, and she said nothing. When they told her she had to go with them for questioning, I thought I'd know when her eyes met mine what would become of Rinn. It was all in her hands now. I couldn't lie for her again.

So when her large, dark-blue eyes met mine and I saw hers were wet, I thought for one moment this was it; she was gone forever, from me, from herself, from any kind of life or future that had promise or possibility or hope.

But then she said, very softly, as the police officers paused in the front doorway, "I love you, Herbie Sawyer. Please don't give up on me yet."

"I won't," I said.

Then they took her away.

Three weeks later. I hadn't seen her in all that time. I'd had to give my statement several times over. I'd had to promise I'd make no mention—to anyone—about the diamonds that had been hidden in the two empty glass boxes tucked in the crate of prisms. It was just a homicide they were investigating, Mr. Evan Fox's murder. Mrs. Spotsworth was in a coma, having been severely beaten and shot once, but she was expected to survive, had round-the-clock police protection. A smuggling ring, it was suspected, was responsible for the two glass boxes—cut in the shape of prisms—which had held several million dollars' worth of gems, mostly diamonds. Maybe the packing crate had been sent to the wrong destination. A stock boy somewhere, or a shipping clerk, had inadvertently mislabeled the shipment, and it had come here, to a little store known as the Christmas House instead of . . .

But that was all guesswork. Few leads. A dark sedan was seen leaving the area of the Christmas House shortly after six that night, probably belonging to the two special customers Mr. Fox had been so eager to entertain.

Apparently those customers had had a different form of entertainment for poor Mr. Fox.

As for Mrs. Spotsworth, there was no way of knowing what she had told them before being shot. Had she told them she knew where that second "prism box" was, in the

hands of a young girl she'd recently fired on suspicion of theft?

As I said, there was no way to know, so Rinn, for her own safety, had been moved again, to a different foster home, a different town. The McAfees were given police protection for a week until it seemed they were okay, too.

I got nothing. My name and address had been on a clipboard, there for all the world to see, but there was no reason they'd suspect me, and even though for several days I watched my back carefully and said a short prayer when I watched my mother drive off for work, apparently this "gang" was smart enough to know when to cut their losses, back off. If the police had the diamonds . . . nothing else they could do.

Such were my thoughts as I stood at the end of the road, watching the sun set over the bay, across the islands in the distance where a large flock of scaup wheeled and spun in the sky. There was a good chance I'd never see Rinn again, I thought. And just as good a chance I would. They could ship her to Tadzhikistan, and she'd find her way back.

"Your mother said you were out here. She said you walk out here almost every day, watch the sun go down."

She was dressed more warmly, hands stuffed in the pockets of a navy blue pea jacket. Her hair was shorter, cut to her shoulders, and her face looked fuller—fuller, not happier.

"Hey, Rinn," I said. "Where've you been?"

"Can't tell you, Herbie."

"Then how'd you get here?"

"I've got a bike. I've got a thumb. I'm a girl with a flat tire." Her whole face beamed. "It'll get you anywhere on the Cape. Every guy over eighteen has his own pickup truck."

"Don't even say that," I said.

"Do you want to know what I was doing?" she asked, coming alongside me, then starting to walk across the crisp white lawns toward the Whites' cottage. "I mean, with the prisms, Herbie." She pulled her hands from her pockets; she was even wearing gloves.

"I don't . . ." I shook my head; I was suddenly having trouble with this conversation, didn't want to have it, wanted only one thing and that was to . . .

"Think, Mr. Perfect, Mr. Smart Guy!" she teased, dashing ahead of me. "All I wanted to do was see if he, if Sir Isaac Newton were right! That's it! That's all! In science . . ." She paused, looked at the bay, "In Mrs. Filiades' science class we saw this movie about him and how he proved that white light is a mixture of all colors. He broke down white light, he—"

"He reflected it through a prism and was the first to explain that white light was actually a mixture of all colored wavelengths."

"Light *refracts* through a prism, not reflects," she corrected me, her small face beaming. "Yes. And then he took a second prism, Herbie, and placed it in the red band of light and showed that the light will separate no further; it remains red. That's all I wanted to do. Then return them. I swear it."



"You could have done that at the store."

"No, I couldn't get the angle right or something. Then I noticed that two of the prisms were different."

"They were broken, you said. But you meant—"

"That they wouldn't work! They wouldn't refract the light at all. They were kind of solid and different. The light wouldn't go through them, and they felt funny in my hands. That's because they were full of diamonds and sand so the diamonds wouldn't move around and be so noticeable. I guess they did that so if someone like a customs inspector pulled one out of the crate they'd feel and look like the others."

Her face changed again. "Or so the police think. Anyhow . . ." She shook her head as I held out my hand and darted away, up the steps of the Whites' cottage. Then, instead of occupying our usual spot, the top step, she walked along the

porch, hand on the rail, facing the water. She seemed nervous, excited, or both, something she could do too, too well. "I'm so restless, Herbie," she said to me. "I'm not satisfied just looking out at that water . . . those islands, do you see them? I want to see them; I want to look right at them, down to the tiniest grain of sand. I want to build telescopes, Herbie; I want to design microscopes. I want to see things no one else has ever seen."

"Maybe you will, Rinn," I said, standing beside her. I leaned forward, resting my arms on the railing.

"Maybe I will," she said, walking behind me. For a moment I thought she was going to leave again. Instead she paused, and I felt first one of her arms, then the other, slide around my waist.

I grabbed both her wrists in my hands.

Then felt her put her head against my back.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Displaced Missile

Jacob Hay



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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“All contact lost,” said the bulkhead loudspeaker in the Firing Control Center, its tone detached. “Over and out.” There was a silence fraught, as they say, with finality.

“Well,” said one of the stricken group standing before the Final Firing Command console, “back to the old drawing board, eh? Looks like Aggie’s gone down at sea, poor girl.” There was a murmur of assent. At least Aggie had left the ground, which was, after all, more than Jupiter C had done. Slowly, gloomily, the stricken group reached for their hats. Aggie was missing, presumed lost, somewhere in the broad Atlantic.

In this presumption the group was in grievous error. At precisely three fifty-two A.M., Eastern Standard Time, Sergeant Jere Emspacher of the Dexter, Pennsylvania, city police became the first man in history to see at close range the Agamemnon Mark XI Intercontinental Ballistic Missile perform an emergency landing.

“All of a sudden,” Sergeant Emspacher later told the *Dexter Dispatch*, “there was this real bright light, oncet, and then come this wonderful big noise, like it was one of them jet planes; still, only much louder; so I looked up, and that’s when I run.”

It is as well that Sergeant Emspacher ran when he did, finding refuge in the concrete staircase leading to the Crystal Lunch, in the basement of the Bauer Building on the southwest corner of Continental Square, Dexter’s hub. As he cringed there, a titanic cylinder settled slowly down from the heavens upon a roaring, white-hot pillar of fire to sink its huge tail fins gently into the boiling, bubbling pool of asphalt which had, until seconds before, been the surface of the square. Abruptly the great gush of flame that spread thunderously out around it like the train of some monstrous ballgown died, to be replaced by a tremendous cloud of thick gray smoke. Then slowly, very slowly, as one of the giant fins found a softer subsurface than its fellows, the cylinder inclined its towering bulk six degrees in the general direction of Harrisburg. And stopped, its polished white shell gleaming eerily in the pale glow of the smoke-shrouded streetlights, its nosecone ten stories up in the air and roughly on a level with the top floor of the Hotel Phineas Dexter, the tallest building in town. Aggie, her poor brain a hash of electronic hysteria, had arrived. In this wise began the ordeal of Dexter, Pennsylvania.

It was purest chance that made Mike Brewer, city editor of the *Dexter Dispatch*, the second man on the scene. He’d been wandering, lonely as a cloud and wretched as a wet hen, ever since Miss Betsy Watkins had told him firmly, just before she kissed him goodnight, that she would positively refuse to marry him if he persisted in his mad plan to assail New York rather than stay on in Dexter and take over her fa-

ther's newspaper. His first reaction to Aggie was, in consequence, to wonder if he were not unhinged by love. He took a second long, long look, and reason returned. Then he headed for the *Dispatch* city room as fast as his rangy legs could run.

At which moment Dexter's air raid-warning system went into action. Sergeant Emspacher had seen his duty and done it. And all hell broke loose.

It reflects no discredit upon the municipal administration of Dexter to state that thereafter chaos reigned. It is your rare third-class city that is prepared to cope with a ten story missile set squarely in its center. Within minutes, roughly one half of Dexter's population was attempting to reach the square to see what went on, while the other, equally determined, half sought refuge in the hills. Suffice it to say that by five A.M. the city had taken what steps it could to protect itself, although from what was not entirely clear.

It was at five oh-four A.M. that Aggie began the first of what was to become a series of nerve-rasping gurgles. Aggie went: "Blurp." And from high up her polished flank there wisped a thin jet of what might have been condensing oxygen or something no one cared to think about too deeply.

The Hotel Phineas Dexter was now evacuated right down to old Mrs. Whittigham, who had to be bundled into her electric wheelchair by force. "The hell with the Kaiser!" Mrs. Whittigham kept yelling, with great bitterness.

And in the *Dispatch* city room Mike Brewer was repeating, almost hopelessly, into his telephone, "I have not been drinking, confound it! As soon as I can get a decent print developed, I'll put it on the wire and you can see for yourself!"

"Ha!" replied the Amalgamated Press bureau chief in Harrisburg sternly. "What's all that racket?"

"The Red Cross Motor Corps!" Mike cried above the cacophony of horns that now arose from the street below. "They're conducting an emergency mobilization, only I think the Boy Scouts are in the way. Or maybe it's the Girl Scouts."

"Boy Scouts!" the bureau chief roared. "Girl Scouts!"

"Maybe it's the Loyal Order of Moose," Mike said irritably, "but somebody's setting up a field hospital." And hung up. He decided to return to Continental Square.

There he found the Honorable Leon Gladfelter, mayor of Dexter, who was in a pitiable state. "I just called the governor," he told Mike. "He told me to go home and sober up. What are we going to do, Mike? Stand around and wait for that thing to fall over or blow up? This is somebody's missile. We've got to find out whose and then make them come and take it away."

"There ought to be some sort of night duty officer at the Pentagon," Mike suggested, peering down at his rotund honor.

"We'll use my office," the mayor said. "If I'm going to be blasted to bits, I want to be at my post."

"Graackkk," Aggie rattled briskly. "Gurk."

"Maybe," Mike said, "we'd better hurry."

"Major Nurney here," said the night duty officer at the Pentagon some minutes later. "You say your name is Brewer and you're calling from where?" Briefly Mike outlined the situation and heard with dismay the major's muffled aside: "Some of these crank U.F.O. calls sure make you wonder, don't they, corporal?" Then, in soothing tones, the major advised Mike to put the pertinent details in a letter, noting times and compass directions, with names of other witnesses, if any. Then the major hung up.

At five forty-five A.M. the first wire photos from the *Dispatch* reached Harrisburg, and Mike found time to call Miss Betsy Watkins. "You're not to come in to work today," he ordered firmly, picturing her blonde hair still tousled from sleep. "We've got enough women's features to make up your page, so stay home. In fact, stay down in the cellar."

"I'll be with you in fifteen minutes," Miss Watkins told him with like firmness.

Mike grinned and shrugged; Miss Betsy Watkins had a mind of her own, which was probably why he loved her, now he came to think of it. He went back once more to the square.

By now most of the central portion of the city had been evacuated, and the square was almost deserted except for a cluster of city officials gathered by the stairs to the Crystal Lunch.

"We've got to find out who owns it," Mayor Gladfelter was saying as Mike approached. "The city solicitor's on the phone to Washington right now, trying to get some action. But nobody's up yet."

At six fifteen A.M. the world learned of Dexter's plight. The Harrisburg bureau chief had seen the pictures and acted in the highest tradition of his news service. And Betsy Watkins arrived, storming past the police barricades in a flurry of flying skirts, blonde hair, and press passes. At the South George Street entrance to the square she stopped in her tracks, her sea-green eyes appalled at the spectacle that greeted them. For while she had seen Aggie from afar, the bulk of the Colonial Insurance Building had concealed the Dexter Fire Department's proudest possession, its extension ladder truck, ladder erect and fully extended and leaning within inches of Aggie's gleaming shell. Perched at the very top was the lank figure of Mike Brewer, horn-rimmed glasses glinting in the sun.

"It says here," Mike called from his dizzy altitude, "KEEP AWAY FROM FIRE! And that's all it says, except HANDLE WITH CARE!" He began the long climb down to street level.

"H'm'm'm," Aggie murmured restively. "Zisk. Tik-tik."

Oh no, Betsy Watkins prayed. Please, heaven, not now.

"I just don't get it," Mike said when he'd rejoined the band of officials by the stairs. "You'd think there'd be some sign as to who owns it: Army, Navy or Air Force."

"I think I can answer that one," said City Solicitor Walter deHoff, joining the group. "And I think we're in worse trouble than we figured. I've just been on the phone to the Pentagon, and they've finally admitted that a missile was fired from a secret Navy testing ground—just where, they won't say. But here's the rub: it was a new missile, ultra top secret, developed by the Air Force. But get this: the actual firing was done by a highly specialized Army team."

"So?" inquired Mayor Gladfelter.

"So," replied Solicitor deHoff wearily, "nobody will admit anything. In fact they absolutely refuse to acknowledge that this one—our missile, that is—is the one they fired this morning. But assuming that it is, the navy says it's the Air Force's baby, and the Air Force says the army fired it, so it's the army's problem. That was after I told them we were only thirty-odd miles from Gettysburg as the crow flies."

"But weren't they even the least little bit curious to know if this mightn't really be their rocket?" Betsy Watkins asked tentatively from her position just behind Mike.

"This close to Gettysburg?" Solicitor deHoff laughed harshly.

Mike's dark eyes were thoughtful behind his glasses. "It may take them days to untangle the security regulations. Meantime, we may all get blown to smithereens. We've got to jolt those people loose, and fast. And maybe I've got the answer. . . . Your Honor, will you and Solicitor deHoff join me in a slight conference?"

And bowing courteously, the three men withdrew in the direction of City Hall, leaving Miss Betsy Watkins staring, more than slightly annoyed, at a poster affixed to the door of the Crystal Lunch announcing that the Dexter Little Theater Workshop would present *An Evening With Chekhov* in the auditorium of the William Penn Senior High School the following Tuesday night.

By eight A.M. nearly every available extra room in the suburbs of Dexter had been rented by the swiftly gathering horde of newsmen, and by nine A.M., the first of the foreign military observers had arrived. Emergency feeding stations had been set up in the basements of four suburban churches to accommodate evacuees from the central-city area, and Dexter's two radio stations were transmitting disaster instructions at regular intervals.



The state police had begun rerouting traffic via back roads completely around the threatened city, and the governor had twice called the mayor to demand just what the devil was going on. Told, the governor had replied coldly that the federal government had got itself into this mess and the federal government would have to get itself out.

Mayor Gladfelter called a conference of the press for that afternoon in City Hall.

And Aggie was now producing a noise that sounded like "Thunk-tik" every fifteen minutes. The tiny feather of escaping gas had vanished, to be replaced by a thin trickle of pinkish liquid that ran down her slanting side and formed an ominous, slowly widening pool in the seared and buckled asphalt of the square.

Over Miss Betsy Watkins' strenuous protests, Mike Brewer isolated himself in his office and made a number of mysterious phone calls. In response to Betsy's questions, the *Dispatch's* switchboard operator could say only that most of the calls were to various of the city's undertakers. "Looks like he's getting set for the worst," the operator declared morosely.

At one P.M., in the basement of City Hall, the press assembled in the brilliantly lighted tile-walled chamber that normally did duty as the police department's drunk tank. News cameras whirled, flashbulbs flared and cameramen leaped nimbly here and there, the correspondents muttering irritably at their antics. Mayor Gladfelter rapped for order. This was his finest hour.

In brisk, businesslike tones His Honor informed the press and the world that since the Department of Defense refused to acknowledge ownership of the object in Continental Square, he, Leon Gladfelter, acting on the advice of his city solicitor, did now declare said object to be the property of the city of Dexter. Further, the mayor continued, by virtue of the authority vested in his office, he had appointed Michael Brewer, a resident of the city, as agent for the municipality in the matter of disposing of the aforesaid object. Already, the mayor concluded, Mr. Brewer had received interested queries from several foreign governments.

There was an instant's stunned silence, and then a great hoot of incredulous laughter as the press corps broke ranks and stampeded for the nearest exits to report the first word of what was quickly to become known as Gladfelter's Glorious Goof, thanks to an unknown metropolitan headline writer.

In all fairness it must be stated that the Department of Defense had not been inactive meanwhile. Four separate boards had been established to ascertain the circumstances surrounding the firing of the Agamemnon Mark XI ICBM. The Secretary of the Air Force had spo-

ken bluntly to the Secretary of the Navy, who had just finished a rather distant conversation with the Secretary of the Army. The Secretary of Defense, for his part, had simply said, "I want action, and I want it fast." But his decision had to be delivered through the proper channels, and this, as is widely known, takes time.

So all through the first long day an anxious world waited edgily for word that Dexter had gone to glory in one titanic burst of flaming rocket fuel and exploding steel. The Chicago *Star-Times* was first on the streets with the news that Aggie was now going "Tik-thunk" instead of "Thunk-tik." The Kansas City *Eagle*, through its staff correspondent on the scene, estimated that some fifty gallons of the pinkish liquid seeping from Aggie's innards now lay in the puddle in the square. A thin, unwholesome mist appeared to be rising from the puddle, the *Eagle's* man reported, and it had an aroma not unlike that of salted peanuts.

Only the late editions of the afternoon papers carried the story of Dexter's plan to sell its unwanted missile. The tone of their stories was generally snide. The city's agent, a man named Brewer, could not even be located to say which foreign governments were interested. The Department of Defense had no comment.

A White House spokesman hinted that the whole thing was a hoax, and later redefined this statement to indicate that while it might not be a hoax the incident was not in very good taste. A still later statement repudiated the first two and declared that the matter was under study, pending a full report from all agencies.

And Dexter became a beleaguered city as the curious, heedless of the potential danger, came in their legions to camp on lawns, in farmyards, in garages and in the fields, and waited, palms sweaty and eyes gleaming, for Aggie to blow up. Hawkers of plastic space helmets for children did a thriving trade, and bookmakers profited briskly as the betting on Dexter's survival fluctuated.

From Dexter that night there moved separately and by various routes a number of large black highly polished limousines, to assemble in the darkened streets of a village some twenty-odd miles to the south and away from the main highways. There, in the pleasantly old fashioned lobby of The Merchants' House, their occupants were addressed by Mike Brewer, who'd spent the afternoon and evening dodging the press.

"Come straight in from the south," Mike told his listeners. "As if you were coming up from Washington. The city police will give you an escort at the edge of town. Drive straight into the square. Drivers remain by your cars and look mean."

"You're sure that thing won't blow up, Mike?" asked Mr. Stephen Littleton, professional director of the Dexter Little Theater Workshop.

"I'm not sure of anything," Mike replied, shoving an angry hand through his crewcut black hair. "But we've got to get some action before

something does happen. You gents are the bait, I hope. I figure something will happen when the Pentagon sees pictures of you characters fiddling around one of their top-secret babies."

"Don't fiddle too hard," cautioned Mr. Albert Small, senior partner of Small & Horn, Morticians. "That kind of business I don't want, believe me."

"That's it, then, gents," Mike concluded. "Now let's have a beer, relax, and get a good night's rest."

After which he headed back to the city to spend the remainder of the night at the Watkins residence, where the guest bedroom offered sanctuary of a sort from the searching newspapermen.

The next day broke sparkling clear, the sun's rays flashed blindingly off Aggie's metal sheathing, and a man in Mt. View, Pennsylvania, a few miles to the north, reported that he could plainly see the giant missile's nosecone towering prominently in the skyline, as tall as the steeple of the First Presbyterian Church.

From the roof of the Hotel Phineas Dexter, by special permit of the mayor, television cameras brought the day's first view of Aggie into the homes of countless millions of Americans at their breakfast.

At his own hasty breakfast, shared with Miss Betsy Watkins, Mike wondered for the thousandth time whether the volunteers from the Dexter Little Theater Workshop were up to the tasks he had imposed upon them. Those faked license plates, for example; they must be absolutely perfect.

At nine thirty A.M. of that second day Police Chief Amos Koons personally arrested the newly arrived correspondent of the Soviet news agency Tass, a gentleman named Urbanov, on a charge of violating Dexter City Ordinance No. 112, as passed by the selectmen of Dextertowne and approved by the Honorable Proprietors of His Britannic Majesty's Colony of Pennsylvania in June of 1742, which expressly "forbyds anye person from smokyng a tobaccoe pype or seegar within four-score yards of anye house of worshype." Mr. Urbanov was confined and a hearing set for late that afternoon. His presence anywhere near the square, Mike had felt, would be most undesirable, if not indeed fatal to his scheme.

At nine forty-five A.M. Mike stood with Betsy near the steps leading down to the Crystal Lunch, which had become Dexter's forward command post. He held her hand in a grip of iron. Across the square a gaggle of correspondents spotted them and, skirting swiftly around Aggie's fins, headed in their direction. Seconds later the two were surrounded by the press, bellowing questions.

"Gentlemen, please!" Mike shouted over the uproar, which died sullenly. "I've nothing to say at this time, but I'm expecting, almost any

minute now, a development that may clear up this whole ugly mess! In the meantime I must ask you to clear the square!"

"That is, git," said Police Chief Amos Koons, approaching meaningfully. "I got ordinances I ain't used in years, if you follow my meaning. You guys are supposed to be up on the roof of the Phineas Dexter anyhow."

The square was cleared but not without some strongly worded protests, and for at least one edition, the *Montreal Commercial* carried the headline HICK EDITOR TERRORIZES STRICKEN CITY.

At precisely ten A.M. a cortege of six black limousines drove into Dexter from the south, passed smoothly up South George Street behind a Dexter City police escort, sirens screaming, and swept splendidly into Continental Square to dispose itself in a kind of phalanx facing Aggie's southernmost fin. As one engine, the engines of all stopped, and from each limousine sprang a uniformed chauffeur. From the limousines there then emerged a company of men garbed in drab gray and solid black ankle-length overcoats. Some wore broad-brimmed black fedoras while others affected shaggy fur caps of that style so popular in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and points east. The entire company of *An Evening With Chekhov* had arrived.

Mike walked slowly across the square and gravely shook hands with the tallest of the new arrivals. "Nice timing, Steve," he told the director of the Dexter Little Theater Workshop, magnificent in a crepe beard. "We've got the press corps watching us like hawks. The bait's in the trap, so let's put the show on the road."

Immediately the group broke up. From the trunk of one limousine were produced a surveyor's tripod and transit, and this being set up, several of the company began making rapid but precise measurements of Aggie's dimensions. Others produced cameras while still others flashed slide rules and other engineering instruments. Some merely made notes. Steve Littleton and Mike continued in deep conversation, occasionally nodding enthusiastic agreement.

On the roof of the Hotel Phineas Dexter there was general agreement that the District of Columbia Diplomatic Corps license plates—as reproduced by Steve Littleton's scenery and properties committee—could only belong to the Russian embassy, although there were those who held out for the Czechs or Poles. So engrossed were one and all by the scene, such was the whirl of newsreel cameras and the uproar of conversation, that what then ensued came as something of a surprise.

Mike's scheme was working better than he realized. Even as he and Steve Littleton went through their elaborate pantomime, a thunderous roaring filled the morning skies over Dexter, growing and growing until the city seemed buried beneath a flood of sheer, overpowering noise.

At exactly ten twenty-one A.M. Dexter, Pennsylvania, became the first

city in the United States to experience a successful vertical envelopment by helicopter. Combat Command Williamson, United States Marine Corps, had the situation well in hand.

The drunk tank in the basement of City Hall was packed to bursting with various members of the Dexter Little Theater Workshop and the city's mortuary profession. Mike Brewer was in solitary, and Betsy Watkins was in hysterics in the mayor's office upstairs. Continental Square bristled with machine guns, mortars, recoilless artillery, and assorted marines, led by Colonel Henry (Bulldog) Williamson, liberator of Pingo-Pango and other islands too numerous to mention.

Not until eleven fifteen A.M. was Betsy permitted to visit Mike, who looked somewhat rumpled in consequence of his having attempted to reason with a number of purposeful marines. "I'll wait for you, Mike, darling," were her first tearful words as she flung herself against the bars that confined her fiancé. They embraced tenderly, albeit with difficulty, and to the unconcealed dismay of the marine corporal on guard, who said, "Hey!"

From an adjacent cell City Solicitor Walter deHoff and Mayor Leon Gladfelter watched tolerantly. "Nice youngsters, Leon," said the city solicitor. "At least, we gave it the old college try."

"You wait, Walter," Mayor Gladfelter sputtered. "I'll take this incident right up to the Supreme Court."

"And I for one wouldn't blame you, gentlemen." An imposing figure in the uniform of a fleet admiral had appeared in the basement. . . . "Corporal, release these people at once. . . . And please accept my apologies, all of you. Colonel Williamson was only doing his job as he saw it, you understand."

The admiral walked to stand before Mike's cell. "Ahem," he coughed tactfully as the two young people faced him. "A very creditable and ingenious scheme, young man, very. We tend to overdo this security business every now and then, and maybe you've taught us a lesson. Your announcement that you'd found a buyer for Aggie brought more action than I've seen around the Pentagon in years. But now let's go upstairs and perhaps the mayor can find us all a nice, hot cup of coffee, eh? Been quite a morning, all in all." And the admiral chuckled jovially. "We'll have Aggie out of your hair, or should I say square, by midnight tonight."

Barely a week later Mike and Betsy stood by the stairs to the Crystal Lunch, gazing out across the newly repaved surface of the area where Aggie had reared her monstrous, beautiful, and deadly bulk. A yellow moon shone down upon a scene of near-perfect peace: a group of youthful motorcyclists preparing for a wild ride through the moonlit countryside; Sergeant Jere Emspacher preparing to arrest them; a hopelessly

lost motorist cursing helplessly at the lack of directional signs and bidding his wife shut up. Dexter had returned to normal.

"I'm so proud of you, Mike," Betsy murmured. "All those New York papers calling you the editor who licked the Space Age." And she hugged his arm tighter than before, which was no small achievement.

"This isn't a bad town," Mike said quietly. "I'm kind of proud of it, in fact. I think I'll stick around. Forever, I hope."

"You know," said Mayor Leon Gladfelter, who had approached without their being aware of him, "I'm kind of going to miss the old girl. She put Dexter to the test, and Dexter did pretty well, I think. And she sure put us on the map, didn't she?"

"It could have been the other way around," Mike grinned. "But I guess that's progress of a sort."

And far, far away to the south, at an isolated and secret naval missile testing station on the Carolina coast, stood a giant shape bathed in the harsh glare of floodlights. In the concrete Final Firing Control blockhouse a tense group listened to the loudspeaker on the bulkhead as the final countdown for the launching of the Agamemnon Mark XII Intercontinental Ballistic Missile reached zero. Their fingers were neatly crossed.

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## **SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

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Claudia, wife of Dominic Santino, shot her uncle in a violent argument.

| ARR. | NIECE    | HUSBAND             | CITY         | CAR      |
|------|----------|---------------------|--------------|----------|
| Mon. | Felicia  | Constantine Utrillo | Nashville    | Buick    |
| Tue. | Angelica | Emilio Torricelli   | Philadelphia | Chrysler |
| Wed. | Eleanora | Arturo Xavier       | Raleigh      | Dodge    |
| Thr. | Beatrice | Federico Vittorio   | Omaha        | Lincoln  |
| Fri. | Claudia  | Dominic Santino     | Queens       | BMW      |
| Sat. | Diana    | Benedict Wittali    | Miami        | Jaguar   |



# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**T**read the boards of an Elizabethan stage and help solve a murder remarkably similar to the one dramatized in William Shakespeare's latest hit, *Hamlet*. All this is in store for readers who tag along behind the engaging hero in Philip Gooden's **Sleep of Death** (Carroll & Graf, \$11.95). It's the last decade of Queen Elizabeth's reign, and like so many others before him, young Nick Revill has fled his plague-ridden country home for the lure of the city on the Thames and a dream of becoming a player. Suddenly his luck changes, and he is hired as a temporary member of the popular company Chamberlain's Men performing at the splendid new Globe Theatre. Nick also gains the patronage of a wealthy young man, which is fine until his new friend asks Nick to uncover the truth behind his father's sudden death in his orchard and his beautiful mother's hasty marriage to her brother-in-law. Jolly fun all around.

A cloistered community and a confined setting that is closed off during a blizzard heighten the sense of claustrophobic menace in Stephen Dobyns' thriller, **Boy in the Water** (St. Martin's, \$6.99). Bishop's Hill Academy has fallen on such hard times that it has become a last resort for the wayward and disturbed children of the wealthy. Dr. Jim Hawthorne is a celebrated psychologist, a man who just a year ago would not have considered moving from the West Coast to take up a position as headmaster of this isolated, northern New Hampshire facility. But Hawthorne is recovering from a devastating fire that has left him with burn scars, bad dreams, and a suffocating sense of guilt, and is bereft of family. Few of the staff and students welcome Jim Hawthorne, and more than one person is determined to see that he doesn't stay. As the temperature drops and the tension heats up, it begins to look like Hawthorne may be making his stand against the evil alone.

Fans of Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta novels shouldn't miss the latest installment in her ongoing saga. **The Last Precinct** (Putnam, \$26.95) picks up where Cornwell's last novel ended, moments after Kay

has managed to blind a crazed man chasing her through her home, a man whom she herself was tracking down. This novel pits the stalwart Kay against some new enemies and even, for a time, some old friends as she fights to hang onto her professional life, her reputation, and her trust in herself. By novel's end it is clear that Cornwell is clearing the path for her heroine to head in an entirely different direction in future episodes. Sorry to be so mysterious, but you don't really want me to tell you anything else here, do you?

Ed Gorman's nifty thriller, **Voodoo Moon** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) has enough twists and turns to keep readers breezing through it, and a surprise ending for payoff. Robert Payne is a former FBI profiler who works as a consultant when the spirit moves him. At the request of a former colleague and one-time lover, a young psychic who now hosts a true-crime TV show, Payne finds himself in the town of Brenner, Iowa. Decades earlier Brenner was the scene of a bizarre series of ritual killings instigated by a charismatic patient at the local mental institution. Now a Brenner teen has killed his girlfriend, claiming that the spirit of the mad patient inhabited him. Add to the brew the psychic's ambitious sister, a ruthless producer, the hospital's chief psychologist, an attractive female sheriff, and the sundry townspeople who were (or were not) involved in the original crimes, and you have the ingredients for a fast read.

If you long for more of the likes of Nicolas Freeling or Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, you might try trudging around after police inspector Kurt Wallander. In Henning Mankell's **Faceless Killers** (The New Press, \$14.95), translated by Steven T. Murray, not only have an elderly farmer and his wife been found tortured and brutally murdered for no apparent reason, but a growing xenophobia threatens the safety of innocent immigrants in Wallander's district. Wallander may lose too many battles with his own demons (a broken home life, alcohol, and chain-smoking, to name a few), but he is tenacious in his search to bring the killers to justice. In the meantime Mankell gives American readers a peek into modern life in Sweden.

If you enjoy woman-in-jeopardy novels, here are two worth noting. Andrea Kane's **Run for Your Life** (Pocket, \$6.99) opens with Manhattan attorney Victoria Kensington encountering her dazed and ill sister during a morning jog in Central Park. By the time Victoria returns with help, her sister has disappeared—and her own family insists that she is overseas. To solve this mystery Victoria pairs up with a former boyfriend who is an FBI consultant and may be working on the same case. In Donna Anders' **Dead Silence** (Pocket, \$6.99), employment counselor Liza MacDonough is still dealing with the year-old disappearance of her young husband. The plot thickens when her clients begin hinting at something terribly wrong at the huge aircraft company where she is employed. Puzzling incidents escalate into murder, and an old college friend and a new beau both become suspects.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The July-August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by W. B. Borrebach of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. Honorable mentions go to Kristopher O'Higgins of Madison, Wisconsin; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; Sue T. Brooks of Grosse Pointe, Michigan; Art Cosington of Fairfax, Virginia; Ron Mayer of



St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada; Douglas Empringham of San Bruno, California; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; Maria T. Tatham of Weston, Ohio; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; and Diane C. Perrone of Franklin, Wisconsin.

Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

## PUMPKIN CAPERS by W. B. Borrebach

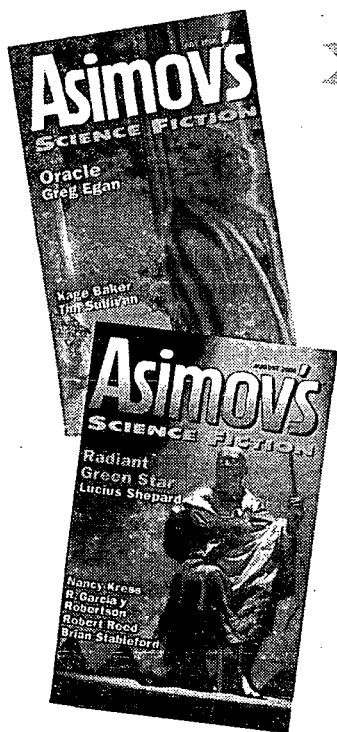
It was a daring daytime heist. A lone gunman and an elephant robbed the only bank in Smallville. No one had paid much attention to the large van parked at the curb. When the bank opened, the van driver scurried in, waved a gun, and announced the holdup. He shouted, "Pumpkin, come here!," at which command the rear door of the van burst open. Out came an elephant to assist his master. Heavy sacks on the floor brought hope to the duo that they had lucked out with a large payroll shipment, just like in cowboy movies. Pumpkin tossed the sacks into the van as nimbly as a chef flipping pancakes. After the gunman pocketed the contents of the petty cash box, the robbers fled.

About an hour later the van broke down. The loot was abandoned, and the robbers set out on foot.

The bank manager—and sole employee—did not want to prosecute. He had just cleaned out the storeroom. The sacks contained only obsolete books and records. The free disposal service pleased him. The total loss was \$5.29 from petty cash.

The police chief—that department's entire staff—had no desire to apprehend the fugitives. He estimated that the food bill for a jailed elephant would exceed Smallville's total operating budget. However, to complete his report he asked the bank manager whether Pumpkin was an African elephant with large ears or Asian with small ears. "No way to tell," replied the manager. "Pumpkin was wearing a mask."

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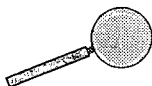
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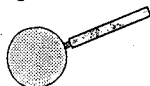
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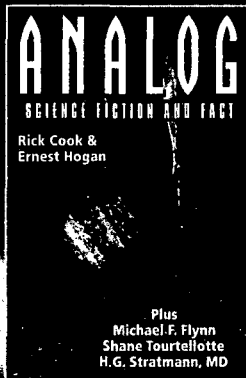
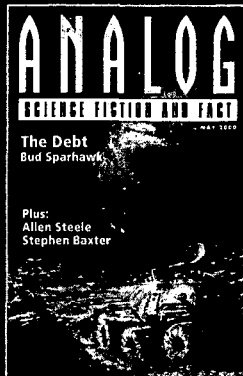
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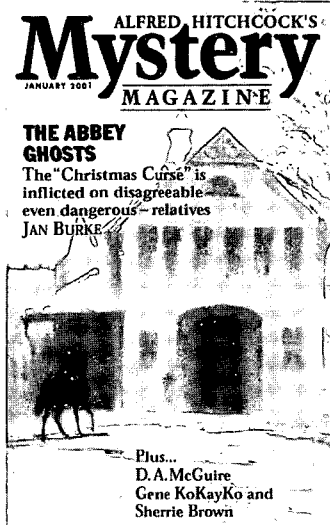
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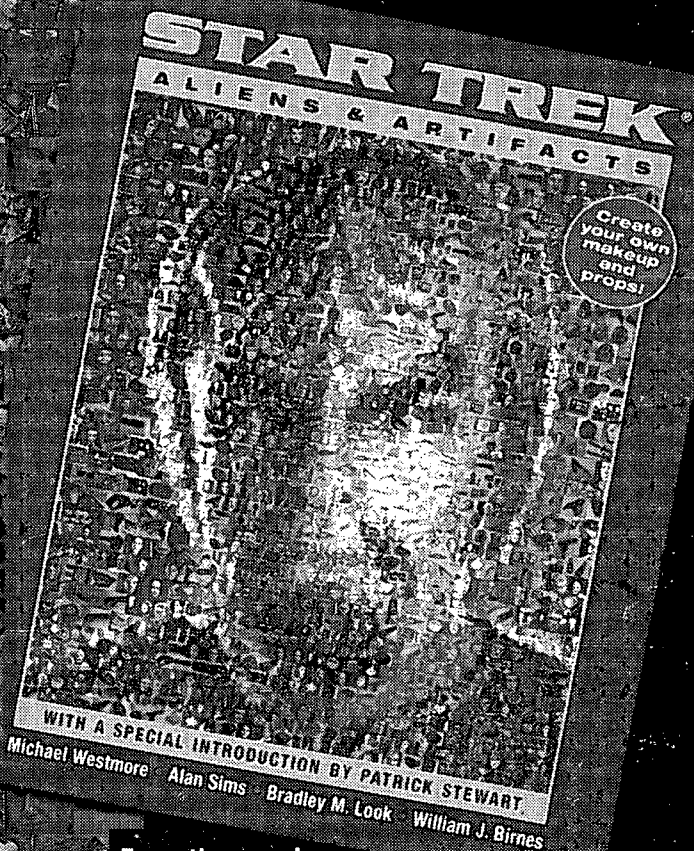
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